The Right to Write:

Novice English Teachers Write to Explore

Their Identities in a Writing Community

by

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ABSTRACT

This research studies the effects of a writing community on three novice, middle school, Title I language arts teachers' perceptions of themselves as educators and as writers. The participants wrote on topics of their selection, on a bi-monthly basis, for one semester, to explore their teaching and learning. The teachers are in their first five years of instruction and work in Title I, urban schools with ethnically diverse students. All participants are National Writing Project fellows. The researcher analyzed teachers' journals, narratives, conversations, interviews and pre-surveys to collapse and code the research into themes. Findings suggest that teachers need time and support to write during the school day if they are going to write. They also need a supportive, honest, and friendly audience, the writing community, to feel like writers.

Findings generated have implications for teacher preparation programs. The participant, who was not an education major, in her undergraduate program, is the only teacher who feels confident in her writing abilities which she connects to her experience in writing and presenting her work as an English and women's studies major. More teacher education programs should offer more writing courses so that preservice teachers become comfortable with the art of composition. Universities and colleges must foster the identities of both instructor and writer in preservice language arts teachers so that they become more confident in their writing and, in turn, their writing instruction.

It may be implausible for novice teachers to be effective writing instructors, and educate their students on effective writing strategies, if they do not feel

confident in their writing abilities. Although writing researchers may posit that

English teachers act as *gatekeepers* by withholding writing practices from their

students (Early and DeCosta-Smith, 2011), this study suggests that English

teachers may not have these writing skills because they do not write and or

participate in a writing community. When preservice English teachers are not

afforded authentic writing opportunities, they graduate from their teacher

education programs without confidence as writers. Once ELA teachers transition

into their careers they are, again, not afforded the opportunity to write. In turn, it

is difficult for them to teach writing to their students, particularly low-income,

minority students who may need additional support from their teachers with

composition. K-12 teachers need the time and space to write for themselves, on

topics of their selection, during the school day, and then, must be trained on how

to use their writing as a model to coach their students.

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to the many K-12 teachers who invest their time and energy in their students everyday for low pay and sometimes, inadequate professional development and emotional support. The world needs and appreciate you! Secondly, this project is dedicated to my husband and high school sweetheart, Jerame James Powell, whose emotional and logical support I needed throughout the entire process. I truly could not have written this dissertation without him. I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to my family, especially my mother, Rosemary Gale, who always showed me unconditional love no matter what the circumstances. My father, John Stewart Gale is another family member whom I would like to thank; my father inspired me to write with his poetry and his nature journals. To my uncle, Sam Insana, your success as a lawyer, musician, and human rights activist allowed for me to believe in myself from the time I was a little girl.

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Writing researchers and theorists contend that teachers should be readers and writers if they want to teach reading and writing effectively (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1993; Cremin, 2006; Graves, 1978, 1984, 1990, 1994; Routman, 1991). Teachers must be informed and aware of their practices, beliefs, and ideologies in the classroom, and explore their teaching in informed, purposeful ways if they are going to improve their teaching and their learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992, 1993, 1994; Kincheloe, 2003; Zeichner, 1994). When K-12 instructors participate in supportive writing communities they can explore their identities (Frager, 1994; Palmer, 1998) which are dynamic and most formative in their earliest years of teaching (Miller, 2006). Although educational research indicates that it is important for language arts teachers to write personally and professionally, there are many hindrances that keep them from writing. Rigorous teaching loads, large class sizes, and grading make it difficult for teachers to write during their teaching day (Kail,1986). It is imperative that teachers be afforded a time and space in which to write (Walters, 1995). Writing groups can provide a system of support to make writing possible for teachers. Writing communities are particularly invaluable for novice, urban educators in low-income schools who are often underpaid, overworked, isolated, and unsupported (Curran & Goldrick, 2002; Shagoury and Hubbard, 2010).

This chapter provides an overview for this study using a strand of sociocultural theory (Vygotsky 1978, 1987), Wenger's communities of practice theory (1998), for understanding the identities of new, K-12 language arts teachers who participate in

a teacher writing community. A sociocultral lens is important for this study because it allows for the researcher to investigate teachers' identities as situated in contexts that are in flux and continuously mediated by professional and personal factors (Tasker, Johnson, and Davis, 2010). This theory affords for knowledge to be constructed and reconstructed as learners work together toward a common goal (Wells, 2000). In this study, teachers shared the commonality of exploring their identities as teachers and as writers through their journals. Studies on identity cohere with sociocultural theory in that teachers' identities are shaped and continuously renegotiated through their social interactions with their students, colleagues, and other individuals whom they encounter in professional and personal settings.

The different areas of research that are in this review of the literature include: (1) communities of practice theory, (2) research on teacher identity, (3) teacher writing groups, (4) the National Writing Project, and (5) teaching journals. The question guiding this study is as follows:

What is the affect of a writing community on three language arts National Writing Project fellows' perceptions of themselves (their identities) as teachers and as writers as revealed in their writing journals, narratives, conversations, and interviews?

This question shaped the focus for data collection and was analyzed through the lens of mutual engagement, as outlined in Wenger's communities of practice theory (1998).

The Theoretical Framework: Wenger's Community of Practice Theory

Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, set of problems and/or passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge by interacting regularly (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Community members have a shared understanding of what they are doing and what their tasks mean to them individually and collectively because they often share common goals or activities and they are mutually engaged in learning from each other. My participants' mutual activity will be writing in their journals, in a community, to explore their identities.

When people learn within a sociocultural perspective, they gain knowledge from lived experiences that occur in a group (Lave, 1991; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Wenger, 1998). Etienne Wenger (1998) is one of many sociocultural scholars who emphasize that learning is a social process that occurs through *active engagement in the world*, in which participants develop practices, beliefs and attitudes, and construct their identities in relation to their community's values and behaviors. Communities engage individually and collectively to make authentic meaning of their experiences. Within this community, all members' discussions are equally valid sources of knowledge. These discussions, and participants' experiences, construct a community's identity. This identity is continuously renegotiated based on members' experiences both in and outside of the group (Wenger, 1998).

Communities of practice theory allows for researchers to study their participants both individually and collectively, because community members are valued solitarily and as a group. Members work together but exchange differing opinions,

artifacts and information on their shared practice forming a *mini-culture* that binds

them. These shared resources allow for members to communicate with each other

and problem solve regarding their practice (Wenger, Mc-Dermott, & Synder, 2002;

Wenger & Snyder, 2000).

Community members also benefit from participating in a group because they

acquire a network of help from their peers. They gain confidence when they solve

conflicts, feel a sense of belonging, and sustain a strong sense of professional

identity that learners often do not attain solitarily (Lave & Wenger, 2001). Such

entities are a source of empowerment for teacher-writers because they afford them

opportunities to share their knowledge and expertise on teaching, learning, and

identity.

Within this theory there are three *modes of belonging* regarding identity:

engagement, imagination, and alignment (p. 173). When members engage in their

practice, they invest in activity and in peer relationships within their communities.

It is through these relationships that members construct a sense of identity. Learning

communities have become a popular means of exploring knowledge and viewing

classrooms. Researchers and educators believe that classrooms must become

learning centers in which teachers and students co-construct knowledge in

meaningful activities (Putnam & Borko, 2000). Such communities are particularly

imperative for new teachers because they can shape, inform, and enhance their

teaching practices (Davis & Resta, 2004).

There are several examples of educators engaging in communities of practice to

study teacher education. Linda Clarke (2009) used this theory to examine student

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teachers' learning in an online professional development program. She found that communities-of-practice theory provided a useful lens to her study, allowing her to examine the complexity of new teachers' experiences through written and online reflections. Mary Stein and Cynthia Coburn (2008) utilized communities of practice theory to understand how school districts can foster environments that nurture learning opportunities for teachers during periods of educational reform. By analyzing the ways that mathematics teachers in two school districts worked with each other in their communities of practice (CoP), Stein and Coburn (2008) discovered that schools using CoP provided significant opportunities for teacher learning and reformed their goals. The district that did not use CoP coordinated its reforms but did not provide meaningful learning opportunities for its teachers.

Using CoP theory to study social justice education, Morva McDonald (2007), examined two teacher education programs, exploring faculty members' definitions of social justice and the conditions that support such education in universities. When faculty worked as a community to integrate social justice curriculum into their teacher education classes, they more effectively prepared preservice teachers for implementing social justice in their own classrooms (McDonald, 2007).

There is a need for further research on how teachers participate in communities to extend their knowledge of teaching and learning (Putnam & Borko, 2000; Richardson & Placier, 2001), on how they participate in teacher-research for professional knowledge (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1994; Richardson, 1994), and on how teachers are writing and publishing about their practice, particularly within the field of English education (Whitney, 2009). Based on a communities of practice

perspective, the purpose of my work is to investigate the effects of a teacher writing

community on three novice, middle school, language arts teachers' perceptions of

their identities as teachers and writers.

Terms and Definitions

There are some definitions that will be used within this study. These include the

following:

1. *Teacher identity*: A teacher's sense of self, which is *dynamic* (Beauchamp &

Thomas, 2009, p. 177) and fluid, constantly being shaped and remade (Danielewicz,

2001, p. 65). Dually constructed, teachers' identities are formed by their emotions

(van Veen & Sleegers, 2006; Zembylas, 2003) and a combination of professional

and personal experiences within specific contexts (Ball & Goodson, 1985;

Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996; Sachs, 2005).

2. *Novice teachers*: For the purposes of this study, these are teachers of grades

five-eight who are in their first five years of teaching.

3. *Teacher-writers*: Teachers who write about their personal and professional

experiences to learn more about their perceptions of themselves as teachers and

writers.

4. *Writing community:* Participants, in this study, who wrote together and

collaboratively, discussed their writing to learn more about their perceptions of

themselves as educators and writers.

Research on Teacher Identity

There are many studies that explore teacher identity from outside the field of

English education. These are crucial to examine because they build a foundation for

examining teachers' perceptions about themselves and their classrooms. Having a

clear understanding of teachers' identities is crucial for analyzing teachers' work,

lives and abilities because teaching is an art that is fueled by human interaction

(Day, Kingston, Stobart & Sammons, 2006). Teachers' identities become especially

complicated in urban settings where their backgrounds may be greatly disconnected

from their students' (Peter Hoffman-Kipp, 2008). While the body of research on

teacher identity is vast (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Beijaard et al., 2000;

Clandinin, 1986; Clandinin & Connelly, 1991, 1995; Mitchell & Weber, 1999), few

studies investigate the identities of language arts teacher-writers who write within a

community of practice.

Dan Lortie (1975), the first researcher to study teacher identity, argues that

teachers work in isolation from their colleagues with little collegial contact because

of their separated classrooms and menial daily paperwork. These separate

classrooms detract teachers' time from valuable interactions with their colleagues

and lead to teachers feeing disconnected and lonely. This study highlights the need

for teachers to learn from one another in a community rather than working in

isolated, compartmentalized classrooms.

Building on Lortie's work, Jennifer Nias (1989) studied elementary educators'

identities in England. She argues that schools must recognize the former selves of

teachers to fully understand their professional selves. Douwe Beijaard (1995)

discovered that high school teachers' professional identities are greatly influenced

by the subjects that they teach and the relationships that they form with colleagues

in their content area. Writing communities, particularly with secondary teachers,

can be a way for educators to forge powerful relationships with their colleagues within their academic disciplines, leading to a strengthened identity. For similar studies refer to Beijaard, Mejier and Verloop (2000, 2004).

Other studies examined novices' identities. Emily Smith (2005) analyzed the identities of new teachers' discourse who worked in a community of practice with veteran teachers. She discovered that participating in a community of practice requires novices to evolve their identities to challenge the underlying assumptions of their schools. Novice teachers are often uncomfortable with questioning veteran teachers' ideas (Smith, 2005). Teacher inquiry can bridge this gap between new and experienced educators, allowing them to share their knowledge with each another. For similar work on teacher identity see Celia Reynold's (1996) and Paul Schempp, Andrew Sparkes, and Thomas Templin's (1999) studies.

Michael Huberman's (1992) work informs later studies on teacher identity in that he identifies it as a set of phases. These include: (1) *survival/discovery* or *reality shock* in confronting new contexts and a feeling of enthusiasm for teaching, (2) *stabilization*, when teachers make a definitive commitment to stay in the profession, (3) *experimentation/activism*, when teachers developed innovative approaches to their instruction, and (4) *disengagement*, or becoming withdrawn from the profession. The *survival/discovery* phase that teachers encounter early in their careers is when educators are most enthusiastic about their students, classrooms, and curriculum. This is an ideal time for teachers to explore their identities within a writing community because they are innately curious, motivated, and interested in shaping their teaching (pp.123-126). For similar research on the

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career cycle of teachers refer to the studies of Christopher Day, et al. (2006),

Jennifer Nias (1996), Betty Steffy and Michael Wolfe (2001), and Jennifer Sumsion

(2002).

Writing and Teacher Identity

Research supports the use of writing to study teacher identity, yet few studies

have examined these ideas together. This section outlines studies that have bridged

these concepts. Alan Frager (1994) conducted a teacher writing workshop entitled,

"The Teacher as Writer." The participants had all been in the classroom for a

minimum of 12 years. A central activity in this workshop was for teachers to bring

in examples of their writing, and draft a paper that discussed what their writing

revealed about their identities as writers. Both positive and negative teacher

identities emerged from the papers. Three distinct groups of teachers were revealed

including *reluctant writers*, who wrote little; *practical writers,* who wrote for

teaching and everyday purposes; and *integral writers,* who saw writing as a natural

part of their lives. Frager (1994) discovered that teachers' perceptions of themselves

as writers greatly influenced the way they implemented their writing curriculum.

His findings suggest that teachers might develop more positive writing identities if

pre and in-service teacher education programs provide opportunities for educators

to write as part of their training. Frager also discovered that teachers' writing

identities improved when they wrote in a group.

Elementary educator Betty Van Ryder (1992) explained that her writing group

supported her both personally and professionally. Her writing group had

participants from a variety of disciplines including teaching, law, and business.

Community members read aloud each others' manuscripts written in a variety of genres including poetry, mystery and narrative. Group members discussed each others' writing and took notes while people shared their writing to provide each other with written feedback. The group discovered that their conversations and writing provided them with an immense system of support that allowed for them to identify themselves as writers whose "...lives have become richer" (p. 55).

In *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer argues that teachers cannot be strong educators unless they teach with an *undivided life* (p. 167). Palmer explains that schools are isolating work environments, but when teachers explore their identities, in writing communities, they build strong identities despite this isolation. He explains, "One finds solid ground on which to stand outside the institution-the ground of one's own being- and from that ground is better able to resist the deformations that occur when organizational values become the landscape of one's inner life" (pp. 167-168). Parker Palmer and Rachel Livsey (1999) developed a book of questions and activities for teacher communities through which educators may explore their "physical, intellectual, and emotional spaces" (pp. 6-10). They contend that the most effective educators have a strong sense of their personal and professional convictions. These identities are forged through writing groups that teachers form with colleagues.

Other studies have explored how teachers' writing in their classrooms affects their identities. Marian Webb (2005) studied four preservice, secondary education teachers' identities during an action research project. Teachers explored the chasm between theory and practice in their writing to examine their emerging identities.

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Webb's findings suggest that teachers are more resilient, both physically and emotionally, when they write and conduct research within their classrooms (Webb, 2005).

Deborah Bieler's and Anne Burns Thomas' (2009) study influenced my own because of their work with teachers who write in communities. Concerned that teacher inquiry is a fixed method in which, "...new teachers' voices and agency are lost" (p. 1030), they conducted a two year study to support novices as critical, reflective practitioners. By allowing teachers to reflect on their teaching and research in their classrooms, in small writing groups, they retain their teaching identities and are invigorated in their practice.

Karen Goodnough's (2010) study, "The role of action research in transforming teacher identity: Modes of belonging and ecological perspectives," investigated action research and teacher identity as situated in a community of practice entitled *Science across the Curriculum.* Goodnough conducted a three year action research project with 50 teachers from three school districts. Teachers gained a sense of belonging, took challenging and rewarding risks in their classrooms, and engaged in *knowledge* construction when they wrote and reflected upon their teaching (Goodnough, 2010, p. 180). This research focused on teacher identity in science education. Few studies have examined the affect of writing on English teachers' identities even though they are writing instructors.

Research on Teacher Writing Groups

Teacher writing groups can be a powerful way for teachers to connect with one another and explore their identities**.** English teacher Tom Williams (1990)

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participated in a teacher writing community. This group of four English teachers

discovered several benefits to writing together including empathy for their student-

writers, a willingness to take risks both with teaching and writing, and a greater

appreciation for the complexity of writing. Williams (1990) argues that his writing

community countered the alienation he felt within his school replacing it with a

"...feeling not unlike a runner's high" (p. 60).

Catherine Patterson and Alma Fleet (1996-1997) conducted a writing group

with novice and veteran teachers in early childhood education. The teachers were

encouraged to write and share stories about their teaching as a community. After

three workshops, findings indicated that teachers used their narratives to write about

issues about staff communications, teacher-parent relationships, challenging

children, and interesting lessons. Teachers reflected on their writing as a way to

make informative decisions about their teaching, and learned from the stories of the

teacher participants in their writing group. This study highlights the importance of

teachers writing to improve their teaching.

Professor Alan Weber (1996) ran a summer writing group for teachers in hopes

that his participants would "fall in love with the act of writing..." (p. 95). He wanted

the teachers to view writing as a hobby akin to gardening or playing an instrument.

The group met outside at picnic tables and wrote stories about personal events that

they had experienced. Teachers wrote personal narratives about their first kiss, and

wrote to playful prompts such as describing the ideal spouse, or a favorite

childhood toy. Through the conversations that the teachers had about their writing

and memories, participants felt more confident about their compositions and

identified themselves as writers. Although this study demonstrates the importance of teachers' stories it does not explore how these stories affected teachers' identities, nor does it examine the differences between teacher and writing identities.

The writing group that has been the most consistent, well documented system of support to teachers who write is the National Writing Project.

The National Writing Project: A National Network to Support Teacher Writers

The National Writing Project (NWP) is a network of sites located at colleges and universities throughout the United States, in which teachers from all disciplines write, edit, and polish their work in a community (nwp.org). In 1973, James Gray initiated the Bay Area Writing Project, on the University of California, Berkley's campus. Since then, more than a million teachers have participated in sites across the country. The program was implemented to develop instructional techniques that would make students' writing more complex and mature (Stahlecker, 1979a). This was due to the great number of college students who were required to take remedial writing courses (Smith, 1996). The NWP has been supportive of teachers' professional development (Blau, 1988, 1993; Milner, Brannon, Brown, Cash & Pritchard; 2009; Pritchard & Jon Marshall, 1994; Watson, 1981; Whitney et. al., 2008) and it has affected the way teachers teach writing to their students (Bratcher and Stroble, 1993; Fleming, 1980; Stahlecker, 1979b; Thompson, 1979; Weiss 1981). For the purposes of this study, this section will focus on how the NWP supports teachers with their writing.

Diane Wood and Ann Lieberman (2000), conducted a two-year study of two NWP sites, and explored how NWP encourages its teachers to be solid writing instructors. Unlike earlier studies, they focused on teachers as "a community of teacher-authors" who see "writing as crucial to learning in all academic disciplines" (p. 257). NWP strengthens teachers' voices, collaborative relationships, and expertise, and empowers them to be teacher researchers (see also Lieberman and Wood 2002, 2003).

Alyson Whyte, Alejandor Lazarte, Isabelle Thompson, Nancy Ellis, Amanda Muse, and Richarde Talbot (2007) conducted a quantitative study on the effectiveness of the NWP with teachers and their students. Whyte, et al. (2007) classified teachers as having *low* or *high writing lives.* The genres for which teachers wrote, (online, book reviews, journals) were classified and recorded. Findings suggest that the NWP is a supportive group in which teachers become authors, writing in specific genres for authentic audiences and purposes. This opens a pathway for working with teacher writing groups in which teachers journal, and discuss and explore the affect of writing on their identities.

Similarly, Diane Lieberman and Linda Friedrich (2007) conducted a vignette study in which the teacher-participants composed a six to 10 page story about a time when they acted as leaders. Publishing 10 of the vignettes, Lieberman and Friederich (2007) give testament to the power behind teachers' authorial voices, particularly when they participate in a supportive writing community like the NWP.

My research question has been particularly influenced by the work of Anne Whitney (2006), whose dissertation examined teacher transformation during an

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NWP institute. Whitney (2006) explored (1) the nature of teachers' transformations, (2) the range of these domains of transformation, (3) and when and why such changes occurred. Using interviews, surveys, teachers' writing samples, and field notes from NWP meetings, Whitney argues that writing within the NWP plays a vital role in teachers' perceptions of writing and teaching, as the institute empowered her teacher-participants to write about their practice and discipline. Whitney's (2006) examination of teacher transformation and writing made me curious about whether writing shapes teachers' identities, both professionally and personally. This study does not examine teachers' identities as writers after an NWP institute. This dissertation fills this gap by exploring teachers' perceptions of themselves as teachers and writers after participating in an NWP summer institute.

Teacher Journals for Reflection

Research highlights the importance of teachers reflecting on their practice to understand their teaching and their learning, and transform these entities (Boyd and Boyd, 2005; Reid, 2009; Schon, 1983; Stockinger, 2007).

Hea-Jin Lee (2005) investigated how the process of reflective thinking develops in preservice teachers. She defines three levels of preservice teacher reflection including: (1) a *recall* level in which one describes what they experience and interpret that situation based on their experiences, attempting ways others have contended with a similar situation, (2) a *rationalization* level where one looks for relationships between experiences and interprets the situation looking for rationale behind what has occurred, and (3) a *reflectivity* level in which one uses their situation to improve future situations. In the *reflectivity* level, novice teachers are

able to analyze and interpret their mentor teachers' experiences, and see the influence of their mentor on students (p. 703). Lee (2005) used a case study approach to investigate preservice teachers' journals, interviews, and observations. Lee's (2005) findings suggest it is important to have prior knowledge on teachers' personal backgrounds, and for universities to provide time for novice teachers to analyze their lessons, and their teaching. Lee (2005) contends that teacher education programs must promote critical reflection among new teachers. For similar studies on the stages of teacher reflection refer to Hatton and Smith (1995) and Van Manen's (1977) studies.

One poignant example of teacher reflection is Betty Bislpinghoff 's (2002) study in which she wrote about her process of *self-study*. She examined notes she recorded in her journal about her negative experiences in English department meetings. She discovered that narrating her frustrations clarified her confusion about illogical school policies, and was a source of *responsible resistance*.

Anne Delaney and Kathleen Bailey (2000) kept journals about their teaching experiences in Asia. They were more aware of their motivations for the decisions that they made in the classroom, and examined and enhanced their practice when they wrote down what they had experienced in their classrooms. Often, they discovered they were not aware of their frustrations until they had recorded them in their journals. They recommend that teachers set aside time to write frequently and that they write at the same time each day.

Robert Root Jr. (1996) facilitated a writing workshop outdoors for two summers with his college students. He discovered that journals are an important part of the

writing group because they "...aid in discovery of topics and arguments, [and in] details and examples" (p. 20). He argues that journals draw memories and information from the writer that are embedded in their conscience, and that journals can advance the development of one's experiences into powerful writing ideas. Root's (1996) students took their journal entries and turned them into polished essays which are in the anthology *North words: Writing the outdoors*. Root's study highlights the importance of journaling in a writing community in that it affords inexperienced writers the chance to reflect on their thoughts, capture their memories, and polish them into quality writing.

David Hyatt and Anne Beigy (1999) studied an English language teacher education course. Using reflective journals, field notes, self assessments, and interviews they argue that reflective journaling is a powerful way for teachers to learn more about language experiences and become more critically aware of other languages. They advocate for more research on reflecting in groups to study language and its effects in different cultures, ethnicities, and religions. Most importantly, they attest that reflective journals should be used in conjunction with discussion as an opportunity for teachers to reflect on situations that are *puzzling, troubling and uncertain* (Hyatt and Beigy, 1999, p. 38; Schon, 1983, p. 40).

Journals can also be used for dialogic purposes. Icy Lee (2008) used response journals for preservice teachers to dialogue with their instructor. She argues that it is only when teachers reflect critically upon their knowledge that they can transfer what they have learned in their preparation programs to real classroom situations. Using journals with 13 preservice secondary language teacher in Hong Kong, she

discovered five themes that permeated teachers' journals: (1) descriptions of their learning experiences, (2) interpretations of what they had learned, (3) evaluations of their teaching self as well as their teacher peers, (4) personal voice, and (5) interactions with their professional preparation instructor. After she conducted interviews, she discovered that 11 of the 13 teacher candidates enjoyed writing in response journals because of the personal and professional support that they afforded them in the early stages of their teaching. The teachers appreciated writing more in their second semester after they had become comfortable with the writing process, so a writing group would have been an additional means of support to teachers in this project. Lee's study paves the way for future studies to be conducted on the personal implications of writing on novice teachers, and how writing might play a role in the experiences that shape who they are and who they wish to become. For a similar study refer to Tsang (2003).

Regina Foehr (1992) studied novice teachers in a writing community. She asked student teachers at Illinois State University to keep journals and to record their empowering experiences while conducting a research project. She used the metaphor of the hero on a quest to describe educators' stories of their first teaching experiences. Teachers reflected on their teaching and writing to inform their learning in their preparation program. The participants felt rejuvenated and excited to teach writing when they recorded their reflections in a teaching journal.

Following in the footsteps of Donald Schon (1983), Dawn Francis (1995) studied reflection as an *intellectually challenging* activity. She argues that new teachers are not provided enough assistance to be successful in reflecting on their

teaching and learning (p. 229), and that they depict what others expect them to say in their reflections rather than their true experiences. Francis (1995) developed a four tiered model for reflection including (1) *describing*, or detailed descriptions on teaching, (2) *informing,* or searching for patterns or ideas that *underpin* one's practice, (3) *confronting* or questioning the historical, social and cultural situations of teaching, and (4) *reconstructing*, or viewing issues differently and creating new goals for future action (p. 232). Francis argues that new teachers feel overwhelmed with weekly readings and assessments and do not typically engage in voluntary writing. After she examined teachers' diaries she discovered that student teachers found it difficult to find time to record their *personal thoughts* (p.232). Francis built in 15-20 minutes at the end of each of her 80-minute workshops for teachers to reflect on their practices, and beliefs, in pairs or small groups called *critical friends* (p. 233). Using prompts connected to their teaching, learning, personal beliefs, and teaching metaphors Francis discovered that critical reflection must be consciously developed with new teachers, that new teachers are concerned with their identities, and that they should explore their "...personal theories that underpin what [they] see, think, and do" (p. 239). She also discovered that reflection is enhanced by participating in a writing group in which teachers both free-write and reflect on structured prompts. Francis' writing community supports the notion that novice teachers need to reflect on their personal and professional lives to feel firmly grounded in teaching. Her findings suggest that more work needs to be done with novice teachers, in writing communities, who critically reflect on their personal and professional memories.

Similarly, Linda Hoover (1994), a professor at Pennsylvania State University, conducted a study of two secondary preservice teachers involved in reflective-thinking assignments during their teacher education practicum. She studied teachers' weekly journal reflections, and videotaped lessons, and discovered that written assignments have the capability for making new teachers think critically, but are often a more powerful vehicle for making teachers' ideas about teaching and learning more explicit. She argues that teacher preparation programs need to build in time for teachers to think critically about their practice and take a *reflective stance* (p. 92). Although she studied new teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning, she did not examine their identities.

Mitzi Lewison's (1996) study argued that there are several problems with teachers writing in reflective journals. After conducting a year long study with kindergarten-fifth grade elementary school teachers she discovered that writing was the least preferred activity, teachers were more emotional when they wrote in a journal, teachers' previous negative experiences with writing or journals affected their reflectivity, and there was a great level of reflective thought in their journals. Most valuably to this dissertation, she discovered that the personal and social contexts in which journal writing takes place make a great impression upon teachers. Lewison (1996) argues that reflective journal writing needs to be coupled with opportunities for teachers to engage in social interactions, and share their writing, particularly teachers who have an aversion to writing.

Positive Implications for Teachers

As artists/writers, teachers may be prompted to demonstrate to children the creative thinking involved, reflecting for example, on false starts or blank spots, the uncertainty of open exploration and their cognitive and emotional engagement. Through sharing their writing, teachers are reflecting upon their own intentions and choices, teachers can enhance the agency of young writers (Cremin, 2006, p. 418).

Drawing on literature on teacher identity and research, my study employs Wenger's (1998) communities of practice theory to examine teachers' perceptions of themselves as teachers and writers within an urban, Title I novice teacher writing group. As a result of this study, teachers explore their identities. Parker Palmer (1998) explained that in writing communities, "As we listen to each other's stories, we are often reflecting silently on our own identity and integrity as teachers...(p. 147) ...we who have attended faithfully to another person have remembered vital dimensions of our own lives" (Palmer, 1998, p. 154). It is the researcher's hope that the participants thought critically about this complexity.

This study is needed because urban, low-income schools are more isolated than ever. In a climate where administrators, politicians, and parents emphasize teacher accountability and high stakes testing to improve student achievement, teachers' identities are lost in the quest to meet these demands. Teachers are often encouraged to teach scripted lessons and use pre-written handouts provided by educational consultants. With these restrictions teachers are left to wonder, where is the role of the self in teaching?

Although research highlights the importance of teachers writing about their teaching and their students to improve their instruction, and ground their identities, there is no time allocated toward writing in K-12 schools. With the vast number of studies that have documented how often new, urban teachers exit the teaching profession prematurely (Early & Shagoury, 2010; Hare & Heap, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Macdonald, 1999) such a study is a necessity. However, this study is not a quick fix to these problems. Writing and identity exploration are complex entities that vary greatly depending on the teacher, school, and state in which one teaches. One certainty, however, is that when teachers are afforded the time to write about their professional and personal spaces, they feel more invigorated to teach and become more resilient.

One of the greatest disconnects that has permeated writing instruction is the lack of artistry and creativity in the teaching of writing (Cremin, 2006). If teachers are afforded the time to think, write, and share their unique personal and professional stories, in a supportive community, they may become more creative in their instruction, and how they handle their difficulties. Akin to Homer's *Odyssey*, "...one cannot be touched if the journey lacks real confrontation, encounter, and risk" (van Manen, 1990, p. 155). The same holds true for teacher-writers. It is through the process of exploring and reflecting upon our personal and professional experiences, which we often take for granted, that we can become more informed about who we are and who we wish to become.

Chapter 2: Methods

Introduction

This qualitative study uses Wenger's communities of practice theory (1998) to investigate the affects of a writing group on teachers' perceptions of themselves as teachers and writers. I conducted my research with three female language arts teachers, in their first five years of teaching, who work in low-income, urban, ethnically diverse schools. These are campuses in which a minimum of 50% of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch and more than 70% of the students are ethnically diverse. The study was conducted with this demographic because new teachers, in low-income schools, have the highest incidence of teacher attrition, with half of them leaving the profession within their first five years (Curran & Goldrick, 2002). Additionally, novices' voices remain underrepresented in K-12 schools and universities. It is the researcher's hope that writing within a community of teachers, from similar experiences, was a means of support to these young educators, and allowed for their voices to be recognized in the educational community.

In line with this study, the Methods Section explains how data were collected and analyzed. First, the setting, participants, and informed consent documents are clarified. In the Procedures section, details are provided on the writing group and teaching journals. The journals allowed for teachers to reflect on their attitudes toward teaching, learning, and writing. This coheres with Wenger's communities of practice theory that argues in order for people to learn, "[they] must become reflective with regard to their own discourse or learning, and to their effects on the

ways [they] design for learning" (p. 9). In the Data Collection section, a demographic profile, journals, and interviews are described. The Data Analysis section outlines how code categories were established.

Setting

The teachers recruited for this study were from urban, low-income, ethnically diverse, urban school districts in the state of Arizona. Some of the teacher participants were recruited from the Sunrise Elementary School District. The district is comprised of 23 schools, 18 of which qualify for Title I funding. Seventy-three percent of the district's students qualify for free and reduced lunch. The district has an ethnically diverse student body, with 52% of its students who are Latino/a, 24% who are Caucasian, 12% who are African American, 8% who are Native American and 3% of its population who are of Asian descent. Other teacher participants were recruited from the Cactus Elementary School District. The district is comprised of over 12,000 students, and its schools are situated in large cities in the southwestern United States. Ninety percent of its students qualify for free and reduced lunch. The Cactus School District's student body is 80.5% Latino/a, 13.4% African American, 3% Caucasian, 1.6% Native American, 0.96% Asian, and 0.08% Hawaiian.

The writing group held its first meeting at a local coffee shop. During that session, teachers determined to hold the writing group at one of the member's condominiums. Rachel Livsey and Parker Palmer (1999) explain that a healthy community should work within a space that is a *community of truth* (p. 6). A community of truth is one in which participants can have a lengthy conversation

about issues that matter with passion and discipline. Livsey and Palmer describe

four spaces that are inherent to a community of truth: (1) a physical space that is

non-institutional and private with natural lighting and fresh air, (2) an intellectual

space which is safe and encourages people to listen respectfully to each other's

thoughts without fear of ridicule, (3) an emotional space that allows for teachers to

tell the stories of their identity and integrity truthfully, without hostility, and a (4)

spiritual space in which participants refrain from *fixing* one another and listen to

each community member (pp. 6-11). Additionally, the space should honor the small

and large stories of teaching, learning, identity, and integrity and "welcome both

silence and speech" (Livsey and Palmer, 1999, pp. 12-13; Palmer, 1998, pp. 73-76).

Participants

Participants were language arts instructors in their first five years of teaching.

They were recruited from a local National Writing Project site. This demographic

was selected because 50% of teachers who work in low-income, urban schools

leave the profession within their first five years of teaching (Curran & Goldrick,

2002).

Informed Consent and Recruitment.

Teachers were selected on a voluntary basis. All appropriate university

permission forms for conducting research with human subjects were approved

through this Institutional Review Board before research was initiated. Each teacher

provided a pseudonym to retain anonymity. Participants signed informed consent

paperwork prior to participation in this study. Participant permission forms were

strictly enforced. An example of this form is available in Figure A1.

Procedures

The teachers participated in the writing community to support each other in their writing. The teacher writing group met bi-monthly for 90 minutes after school. Research on writing and teacher identity has revealed the importance of teachers keeping a journal in which they record their classroom observations, and record their frustrations, and emotions (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Elbaz-Luwisch, 2005; Johnson & Golombek, 2002). The composition of these narratives help construct teachers' identities and serve as a vehicle to share their lived teaching experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999).

Teachers wrote in journals on prompts provided by the researcher. Teachers also discussed and explored writing projects that they initiated. The genre was left up to the participants. Time was allotted for teachers to write in their journals, write manuscripts, and discuss this writing. The investigator took field notes during these discussions, recording observations and categorizing them according to themes that emerged during the group's discussions.

Data Collection.

Essential techniques used by qualitative researchers include (a) observation, and (b) interviewing (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). This allows for the researcher to employ *thick description* that accounts for the complexity of an action research study (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Geertz, 1983). A demographic profile of 14 questions was completed by participants during the first writing group session, modeled after Jessica Early and Ruth Shagoury Hubbard's (2010) study on novice, urban teachers. Questions adapted from this survey included: (1) How long do you

plan to stay at this school and (2) Is this school population one that you wish to

continue working with? This was used to compile demographic information on the

participants (see Figure A2). Additionally, a follow up e-mail was sent, after the

first session, asking participants to describe their appearances, their personality, and

their identities.

Ninety minute writing group sessions included beginning and ending prompts,

and conversations, which revolved around a theme agreed to by the participants.

During the middle of the sessions participants wrote about topics of their own

selection. During some sessions, participants read articles and responded to them in

writing (see Appendix B). The session themes include:

Session 1: The preliminaries of the writing community

Session 2: Defining community

Session 3: Defining ourselves

Session 4: Exploring ourselves through personal artifacts

Session 5: Uncovering our identities and integrity

 Session 6: Reconnecting the self

Session 7: Exploring our classrooms

Session 8: Exploring the heart

Session 9: Revisiting the self

Session 10: Celebrations and successes

The researcher took field notes in a journal, during each interview, and during

all writing group sessions. The researcher used a format suggested by Bogdan and

Biklen (1998). The researcher recorded the date, time and heading at the top of the

notes. These headings were used to help the researcher code the data during analysis. The researcher initiated a new paragraph each time there was a change in topic. This made the data manageable for coding. Every time a new person spoke, they had their initials serve as a label to the left of the page. These initials were pseudonyms to ensure participants' anonymity. The notes included physical descriptions of the participants, dialogue, descriptions of the group's activities, and behaviors. These add *rich data* to the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 125). Both descriptive field notes and reflective or personal analysis of the field notes were employed (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). This ensured that the researcher recorded specific details during the writing group and then reflected on what was observed. Reflective notes were designated by the notation *O.C.,* or *Observer's Comments* (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 123, p. 161). Participants' journals were also examined and coded for reoccurring themes.

Additionally, an interview of no more than one hour was conducted with participants (see Figure A3). This interview was open ended to ensure that teachers' identities were grounded in their stories and their experiences rather than the researcher's. This was useful in signifying any changes that occurred in participants' identities as a result of the writing group.

As interviews were reviewed, headings were utilized at the top of each interview that indicated the person interviewed, time the interview occurred, and location of the interview. Each time a new person spoke, a new line was started using the letter *R* for researcher and *T* for teacher. Room was left in the left hand

margin for coding and comments (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The interviews were audio recorded to ensure accuracy.

Narrative inquiry.

Narrative inquiry is widely recognized as a viable approach to conducting qualitative research (Barone, 2000, 2001; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, Hanson, Clark, & Morales, 2007; Goodson, 1995) and researchers purport the importance of teachers writing personal stories to be more reflective practitioners and critical educators (Romano, 1992; Rush, 2009). Story telling has been used in two prominent ways in the research community (Coulter, Michael & Povnor, 2007). The first, *analysis of narratives*, allows for researchers to study, code and synthesize participants' narratives in their work (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 12). *Analysis of narratives* was used in this study when the researcher analyzed the participants' written teacher narratives, journals, and conversations in the writing group. "When...teachers tell stories about themselves they are not [just] revealing or expressing but crafting and constructing those selves" (Barone, 2000, p. 248). In compliance with this testimony, the researcher studied the participants' teacher narratives to situate their identities in their lived histories. As linguist Charlotte Linde (1993) contends, identity is a narrative in which people continuously reconstruct who they are in its telling. Teachers' stories are shared in chapters 3-4 to provide a robust depiction of their teaching and writing.

In a qualitative study trustworthiness is essential to evaluating its merit (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Narrative inquiry remains focused on this truth, particularly with participants (Philips, 1994; Polkinghonre, 1995). The investigator worked to

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preserve an honest depiction of the teacher participants by using narrative inquiry. This places the participants in the foreground and the researcher in the background.

Teachers used their journals to write about ideas that they wished to explore and to answer various prompts during the group sessions. These narratives served as *personal documents* (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) that were examined to provide the researcher with additional data.

Data Analysis.

Codes were derived from recurring themes in the participants' journals, narratives, writing group conversations, and interviews. See Table 1 for an example.

Table 1

Sample Code Derivation Showing Progressive Confidence with Writing (PCW)

Code:	Participant		
PCW	Charlie	Katelyn	Natasha
Journal Session 1 Writing Topics Brainstorm	"Even with the National Writing Project I still do not feel confident enough to think I could ever write an article to be published."	"I've never thought of myself as being a published writer...I'm still trying to get teaching straightened out."	"I really want to write a book about my experiences as a special education teacher."
Journal Session 4	"When thinking about myself as a writer, I immediately think of my childhood. I loved creating stories." Charlie did not mention writing she composed as an adult.	"I would like to think that I'm decent at writing but what is it going to do for me? Maybe I'll figure it out once I connect a value to it."	"When I write it is about something I want to change or inform people about."
Last Journal Entry/Session 9 and Post Session 10	No entry.	"Writing sets me free. Lacking confidence in my writing is my main struggle. I believe that I am a fairly talented writer."	"I use writing as a tool to inspire change..."
Narrative	Charlie deleted her first manuscript because she believed that it was not good enough to share with the group. Later, she wrote and shared four pages of vignettes about teaching ELL students.	Katelyn's manuscript began as a one-two page excerpt about funny teaching stories. Katelyn expanded it into eight chapters that she composed with a colleague on Googledocs.	Natasha initially wrote a teaching vignette about her classroom experiences. This became a 12 page document about the challenges and rewards of teaching ELD students in a low income school.
Writing Community Field Notes	Initially, Charlie was not sure who would want to read her writing. After the sessions, Charlie explained that writing had more value because she had an audience to read her work.	Initially, Katelyn was not sure who would want to read her writing. After the sessions, Katelyn explained that writing had more value because she had an audience to read her work.	Initially, Natasha was not sure who would want to read her writing. After the sessions, Natasha explained that writing had more value because she had an audience to read her work.
Interview	"Later, I could picture myself writing and reflecting, and maybe publishing something about math or science, lessons that went well, even my journey on improving myself as a science teacher."	"I believe that I have confidence in my writing but it is not fantastic yet.".	"[Writing in a community] gets me back in the mode of writing... it's more realistic [to write for an audience]."

There were a variety of codes that were utilized including but not limited to (a)

situation codes that explained how the subjects related to a particular topic, (b)

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perspectives held by the participants, (c) participants' thinking about people and objects, and (d) event codes or specific activities that occurred in the setting or lives of the participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). This allowed for the researcher to compile a *data display* of organized, compressed information, and capture findings (Huberman & Miles, 1994, p. 129).

Limitations of the Study

One of the limitations in this study was that its participants were all Caucasian females. Including male participants and/or more participants from various ethnicities would have provided a more robust study of teachers' identities as different writing voices may have emerged. For example, an African American male would have written from a different cultural perspective than Caucasian females and would have made the conversations and writing topics that emerged from the study more diverse, adding to more bodies of literature. There were only Caucasian, female attendees in the NWP institute from which participants were recruited so diversity was limited.

Additionally, participants were part of the same National Writing Project summer institute, and had an interest and familiarity with writing that teachers from outside of the National Writing Project would not. However, when the participants were asked about communities they were a part of, or writing that was meaningful to them, none of them discussed their NWP experience. This suggests that more follow-up is needed after NWP institutes if teachers are going to change the way they view writing and writing instruction. Future studies are needed exploring

writing communities with educators after their NWP institutes to clarify whether additional writing sessions would help K-12 educators continue writing.

Because this is a dissertation, it is limited in its scope and funding. This study examines a writing community with teachers from three different urban school districts. A study including teachers' perspectives from multiple urban, low-income, secondary schools would have provided a developed account of teachers' identities regarding teaching and writing because "A learning community must push its boundaries and interact with other communities of practice" (Wenger 1998, p. 274). Additionally, a longitudinal study that examines multiple writing communities, in both rural and urban areas, with teachers from different generations (Wenger 1998, p. 276) would provide more robust data from multiple perspectives. If we had more writing sessions I would have had more time to observe participants' identities as they continued to change, and emerge as " identity is fundamentally temporal...and ongoing" (Wenger, 1998, p. 154).

Identities were revealed from the perspective of each teacher-participant. I could have interviewed participants' colleagues, administrators, and instructors to gain a more expansive portrait of their identities. However, data was triangulated using field notes on teachers' conversations, their writing, and interviews, and themes were gathered using a systematic, grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The themes that were revealed through these samples more often than not cohered with participants' descriptions of themselves. Katelyn had the most inconsistent identity as during some sessions she felt successful as a teacher, and in others she stated and wrote that she had little control over her students' motivation

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for learning. This is consistent with literature on teacher identity that describes it as dynamic (Beuchamp & Thomas, 2009, p. 177; Danielewicz, 2001, p. 65), particularly due to emotional experiences (Rodgers & Scott, 2008; van Veen & Sleegers, 2006; Zembylas, 2003).

Research Questions.

The following question was examined: What is the affect of a writing community on three language arts National Writing Project fellows' perceptions of themselves as teachers and writers as revealed in their writing journals, narratives and interviews? This question was analyzed according to the methodologies described in this chapter.

Chapter 3: Findings

Introduction

This chapter provides background for the three novice, Title I English teachers who participated in this study. I describe each teacher's attitude toward teaching, first experience with writing, and impressions of herself before and after the writing sessions. Weekly descriptions of the writing community are also provided. The following information was collected from interviews, field notes, teachers' journals, and demographic profiles. Some of the similarities and differences between the participants are also discussed.

Charlie

Charlie is in her early twenties and eager to try new activities in her classroom. She is extroverted, energetic, and lively. She volunteered to have the writing community at her home, which was centrally located for the group.

When asked to describe herself, Charlie wrote,

> There are a lot of students in my classroom the same height as me. My students often see me wearing black pants, heals, and a blouse. I sometimes spice it up and wear a dress or skirt, but that is the very rare occasion. I consider myself an easygoing person. Typically, I go with the flow. I can be a leader, but if someone is making a plan I go along with it easily. I am learning to be more organized, but [this] can be my downfall as a teacher. Having fun with friends and family is important to me. I have learned that I need to make time to enjoy my personal life to be a good teacher. Most people would say I am not that serious and I like joking around. Therefore,

in my classroom, I try to make learning fun and laugh with my students often. My husband describes me as being annoying, but then laughed. I can be annoying in the sense that I like things done a certain way. He also describes me as a *doer* and explained that if I say I am going to or want to do something, I am going to do it.

Unlike the other participants, Charlie made references to her students and her teaching when she described herself. I had asked for Charlie to describe her characteristics and did not ask for any connections to her teaching, yet throughout her response she referred to her classroom and her students. This suggests that her identity was first and foremost connected to her role as a teacher.

Charlie's Teaching Background and First Experience with Writing.

Charlie is in her fourth year of teaching at a Title I urban elementary school that is 87% free and reduced lunch. She teaches fifth grade reading, writing, and mathematics. She hopes to continue to teach until retirement. She enjoys working with her grade level team and gets along with her colleagues despite conflicts that she has with one of the teachers on her team, whom she describes as a competitive *micromanager.*

Although Charlie felt disconnected from writing as an adult, she enjoyed writing as a child:

I think of the time I wrote story books with princesses and dragons...maybe around seven. I also remember spending a lot of time on all of my writing and spelling assignments in elementary school. I have always enjoyed writing and the option to be creative with my ideas and my words.

Charlie's Impression of Herself as a Teacher Prior to the Writing Community.

When asked about her perception of herself as an educator, Charlie wrote,

> I am impatient, constantly feeling the pressure of time; wanting students to understand the content quickly so I can move onto the next objective. This makes me sad/disappointed in myself in that I have let the pressures get to me.

She also explained that she understands when students make mistakes but still holds high expectations for them: "The students call me the pickiest teacher they have had so far."

She continued,

> I am a manager, always trying to give equal attention to [students] even when monitoring good and bad behaviors. I am also new and still learning. I know I am improving but I often feel weak as a teacher. I am a circus leader.

Charlie wrote that her writing instruction has improved with time:

> My first year I dropped the workshop style and went into prompt writing. I don't think I was prepared and knew enough about the structure. Now I am seeing huge differences [with] how my students react to writing. By simply sharing my passion in writing my students are getting more excited about it and making improvements quicker.

Charlie's Impression of Herself as a Writer Prior to the Writing Community.

Despite Charlie's love for writing, when I asked her about her impression of herself as a writer, she only discussed her teaching, which she felt confident in unless she was being evaluated. Charlie's was obsessed with perfection. For example, Charlie deleted her first manuscript that she wrote within our group because she did not believe that it was worth reading. This attribute was demonstrated in the high expectations that she had for her students, and kept her from writing more in her manuscripts, because she was worried that she would make a mistake.

In her journal, Charlie wrote,

> Along with teaching I am still new to writing. Unless it was an assignment from school I rarely wrote on my own time. When I do take the time to journal it feels great. I am still shy about my writing and don't like sharing it unless I have put a lot of time and effort into the piece. When asked to write professionally I often feel that my writing is unoriginal....

Charlie's Impression of Herself as a Teacher after the Writing Community.

Charlie's opinion of herself as an educator remained consistent throughout the sessions although she was more honest about her feelings toward teaching. For example, during session 4 Charlie explained how she used cotton balls as party points for her students to reach their goals. By session 9, she acknowledged that she could not keep up with all of the reward systems that she had in place, and felt guilty about this. She continued to compare herself to her colleagues who used

these reward systems and felt badly when she could not implement them or work as diligently as her peers. Charlie continued to see herself as a fun teacher, who was strict and had high expectations for her students. She acknowledged that she was disorganized and impatient but that she was working toward becoming more patient with them.

After the sessions had ended, and Charlie reflected upon her journal and made some discoveries about her teaching:

> I spend way too much time at work. Cause I went into work today for three hours. I think I would always be, no matter what, a workaholic. Even throughout the day I could remember my mentor teacher would be up to answer the phone and I cannot do that. My husband gets mad at me: "It's six o'clock in and you never called me"...so I think no matter what that's just never going to change.

Charlie wrote in her journal entries that she was disorganized yet in retrospect believed that she was organized. She explained, "Imagining my classroom right now it's perfectly clean...everything is in order, so I think I'm really hard on myself. I'm over critical of myself." As we discussed why she was critical with herself, Charlie stated that it was due to her competitive older brother:

> Everything came natural to [my older brother]. He never had to study, genius in my eyes. ...I always had to study and put in more effort so that's why I believe that's who I am. I'm a hard worker so that I fulfill my own image of myself." Like the other participants, Charlie discovered, through

reflecting in her journal, that who she was as a teacher was greatly connected to her childhood experiences.

Charlie explained that she remains passive in most situations and is amenable to others' ideas even if she does not agree with them. She said that this is because her brother, and later her husband, took charge of important decisions in her life.

Charlie also discovered that she was too involved in work and needed something to relieve the stress. She began exercising at a local gym before work. She discovered that she was more patient with her students because of these workouts. "I would feel my blood pressure rising with the kids earlier and now I'm just sort of like I can handle it." Through reading and reflecting upon her journal from the writing community, Charlie made healthy lifestyle choices that assisted her with teaching.

After the writing group had met, Charlie discussed the difficulties of teaching. She revisited the metaphor of herself as the *circus leader* who constantly had to keep multiple tasks going in her classroom, and saw herself as a manager, who had never been trained to fulfill a managerial role:

> My husband said [teaching] is the hardest job that you can do because you really are a manager. You walk in the first day [of school] and you don't have any training really like in...[my husband's job] he was trained for so long until he finally [was] bumped up [as a manager]. In teaching you go in there and you do it so I kind of am a manager.

Charlie's writing allowed her to examine and renegotiate her teaching identity. She was compelled to discuss her job with her family, whom she believed, did not understand its complexity.

Charlie discussed the writing group with her teaching colleagues, some of whom stated an interest in joining the group. The reading coach at Charlie's school also showed an interest in the writing group and wanted Charlie to do a writing presentation at her school. So the community expanded into Charlie's school campus. Like Natasha, Charlie also talked to her students about her writing. She believed that sharing her experiences with the writing group motivated her students to write their own pieces. She discovered that her students turned in more extra credit writing after she had spoken about the group with her students.

Charlie's Impression of Herself as a Writer after the Writing Community.

In the earliest sessions, Charlie spoke about her writing from the perspective of a child. She talked about free verse writing that she completed as a child which she wrote for hours. She brought a marker to session 4 indicating that she loved to write during her elementary school years. By session 9 Charlie brought an adult artifact, a journal, to the group to signify that she was trying to write. The journal's pages were empty, indicating that she had trouble generating with ideas when she sat down to write. Charlie continued to doubt her writing abilities. She deleted her first manuscript from our earliest sessions saying that it was not good enough to read.

Throughout our sessions she continuously apologized for her writing, and stated, "I can't believe that I am sharing this." During session 9, when she shared her teaching vignettes, her husband entered the room. She demanded that he go

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upstairs so that she could share her writing without being embarrassed. However, after sharing this manuscript she became more positive about writing it after participants suggested that she turn it into a series of letters, addressing Jonathan Kozol's book *Letters to a Young Teacher*. She also made more extensive comments on people's manuscripts. For example, rather than saying that a piece was *good* she became detailed in her responses, encouraging Katelyn to add an extra paragraph that was more serious to the end of her first chapter. In the last two sessions Charlie showed interest in presenting her writing at an academic conference, the National Council for Teachers of English Conference. This suggests that Charlie became more confident in her writing and editing abilities by the end of the group.

Charlie explained that in all of her journal entries she made connections to herself:

> Every time I was writing about my own classroom. When we wrote about quotes, I wasn't really writing about the quote, I was writing about how it applied to me. So I think all of the writing was reflective writing. Nothing was descriptive writing.

Charlie evaluated her writing and made connections between it and her teaching. She also discussed writing academically.

In reflecting upon her journal, Charlie discovered,

> I am just not ready to academically write. I enjoy reflective writing but right now, academic writing, publishing something, is just not where I'm at right now. Maybe it's because I'm not feeling as confident in my career. I can picture myself later in a couple of years being able to sit down, write

lessons, and try to publish them, but right now, I can picture it within this

year....

Charlie's participation allowed for her to learn about her limitations as a writer

and explore the possibilities of doing more with her writing in the future. Before the

group, presenting and publishing were not concepts that she had thought about.

Charlie connected her teaching and writing identity to one another. This is different

from before the group when they remained disconnected.

Charlie also discovered new writing genres:

Early in the community I was so focused on writing ELD subjects and I was

so focused on reading. But now I feel like I broadened my interests more. I

just read this book on money...it discussed how the U.S. does not focus

enough on science and math and I just thought wow, I've been so focused on

reading and writing cause those are what I enjoy a lot that I need to be equal

in my passion in sharing with [my students]... I need to work hard on all of

those areas. ...Now I've been thinking I need to try [writing about] new

areas. ...Even in math I can picture myself at some point writing and

reflecting on myself publishing something...I could [write] about math or

science.

Charlie connected her teaching to her writing. This engagement in scholarship is

non-existent in many K-12 communities, and would be helpful in assisting K-12

teachers with their practice as it would allow for them to reflect upon their teaching.

Charlie had evolved from a teacher who could not visualize herself writing to

exploring teaching in a variety of subject areas and publishing articles on those

areas in the future. She discussed the possibilities of keeping a science journal that reflected upon her teaching in that subject and "stepping out of her comfort area in the classroom."

Charlie discussed her role in the writing community:

I wasn't a leader in the group. I was more of a listener and observer. I didn't have a final piece to show everyone how I felt, so it was more just I was learning in the whole thing and getting some good laughs...I just kind of went with everything.

This resonated with Charlie's perceptions of herself earlier in which she said that she remained passive because of her relationships with her brother and her husband.

Like the other participants, Charlie trusted the writing community and felt comfortable sharing her stories. "I trusted them enough that I could tell [the members] about my co-workers and if they ever met them they would never say anything."

Like the other members, Charlie also stated that a writing community would be a valuable resource at her school, although she explained that it may be *unsafe*:

[The writing group] would not be like our group. I can picture it being almost an unsafe writing club because there are a lot of teachers that I can trust but I think a lot of people couldn't share the things that you wrote down and that could end in trouble, especially since writing is so permanent. It's not like a meeting where you say something. You share the writing and if someone else were to come up and talk about the things I wrote about in

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school I could be in major trouble. So it wouldn't be as honest as our writing

club....

Although Charlie shared concerns about forming a writing group at her school she explained,

There should be more opportunities for teachers to come together as writers.

Maybe not so much doing research and publishing but just writing to reflect.

And I think that would help a lot of teachers even stay in the field longer

because they say most teachers only last three or four years. So I think if we

came together more and wrote about the things that we are feeling...believe

it or not we all have that commonality. We all have that stress...but we just

don't talk about it. Or usually it's just complaining and then that's it but we're

not letting it out in a beneficial way.

You need a community to back you up and when I'm reflecting, I realize

how important my job is. When I came back [to my journal] I forgot to

mention how much fun I have and how much laughter I have in my

classroom.

Like the other members, Charlie felt that reflecting and sharing stories from her classroom empowered her teaching and writing. It was a rejuvenate practice that, regardless of the tone of the entries, invigorated her to teach.

Charlie talked about the importance of preservice English teachers writing in their undergraduate courses, as she had taken one class on reading and writing combined. She explained that if not for her master's degree in language and literacy,

she would not have been prepared to teach writing to her students because of her lack of preservice teacher preparation.

Katelyn

Katelyn is in her mid-twenties. Having moved here from a similar settin, in New Mexico, she sees the challenges that teachers are faced with in urban, Title I schools. She teaches seven classes per day with a one hour preparation at the end of the school day.

Katelyn explained,

> I would describe myself as a 26 year old fun-loving teacher.... Enjoying the little things in life is definitely my philosophy. I love music, sports, and cooking. Simply put, I just like to have a great time and enjoy everything that I work so hard to achieve.Nothing in life comes easy, so I feel that what doesn't kill me makes me stronger.

Katelyn's Teaching Background and First Experience with Writing.

Katelyn received her professional preparation through a teaching program at a local university. The program involved classroom observations and reflective seminars in which she was asked to journal about her student teaching experience, and share this information with other undergraduate student teachers in her cohort. She did not find this writing group to be beneficial because none of the student teachers could relate to her student teaching experience. She explained that she was placed at a tough school with little administrative support. She stayed at this assignment because of the relationship that she had developed with her mentor, who

was wonderful. Katelyn was the only participant who had a negative experience with a writing group.

Katelyn's middle school English teacher inspired her to teach because of the passion that she had for her students. Katelyn has taught for three years in a Title I, urban school that is 74% free and reduced lunch. She has primarily taught eighth grade and is currently teaching sixth grade for the first time. She teaches language arts and one section of AVID, a college preparation program.

Katelyn's Impression of Herself as a Teacher Prior to the Writing Community.

When asked to write about a metaphor for herself as an educator Katelyn explained,

> I am stuck [as a teacher]. I really don't know who I am. I'd like to think that I am an inspiration to students, a person they can trust, a person they respect. So I guess I know who I am to my students but I've lost/never found who I am to me.

> Katelyn was confused about her self perception. She could only explain who she was in terms of how her students perceived her, not how she perceived herself. In her journal, she wrote that she was afraid that she might "...never find the real me..."

Katelyn wrote,

> I am confusion; I am a maze, I get lost, but retrace my way, several times over. I'm not finished nor will I be for a long time. I'm still searching,

finding the right path that hopefully leads me to the finish, or at least where

I want to be. Yes, I am a maze.

For Katelyn, teaching is linear; educators reach a point when they will need to search no more. Katelyn was comforting herself with this thought as someday, she would be at the end of maze.

Katelyn's Impressions of Herself as a Writer Prior to the Writing Community.

Katelyn explained that when she wrote it was for her classes or to *write out* her frustrations: "I loved to write creative stories when I was a kid; I wanted to be a journalist at one point. My time and attention [as a teacher] do not allow time for much writing."

Katelyn loved to write stories that were stream of consciousness:

I love teaching, always will. It's getting harder and harder and the pay is getting lower and lower. For now, I do enjoy inspiring kids, especially about reading and writing. Writing is something everyone can do. It's not like math that just feels too complicated. Writing is natural, and my hope is to instill in kids what it is personal and wonderful.

Katelyn described a natural connection to writing that the other participants had not; however, she also felt unconfident about her writing.

Katelyn wrote, "I am all about tough love as a teacher. As a writer, I don't really know who I am. I'm pretty much a fan of writing...I am not completely sold on publication just yet."

Katelyn was skeptical when asked to write a metaphor for herself as a writer:

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Me as a writer? That's tough. Non-existent comes to mind there. A black

hole, a vacuum, nothingness. As a writer I like to be entertaining, that's what

I like to read--entertainment. I'm surrounded by information; I need a little

imaginative outlet, fun writing, yet fact based. I find the most entertaining

stories have a basis in truth. So as a writer I am?! Puzzled, and apparently

incapable of writing that word. I am not professional, not overly serious, not

time managed, to organized, not hating it. I like to write, I love to create

with words. I just need to take it more seriously but how? When do I have

time? I enjoy my relaxation. Hmmm.

Although Katelyn believed that all of her students could write, she did not

believe in her own writing abilities. Katelyn spoke about her writing from a deficit

perspective, prefacing her sentences repeatedly with the word *not.*

Katelyn's Impressions of Herself as a Teacher after the Writing

Community.

During our fourth session, Katelyn focused on the memories that she had of

teaching during her first year. She brought in a ceramic vase that said love on it that

one of her students had brought to her as a souvenir. During the ninth session;

however, she shared a broken rubber band with the group that signified that she was

a worn out teacher. This suggests that she felt more comfortable sharing the less

optimistic thoughts she had about her teaching toward the end of the sessions. She

hoped that she would not *break* from the daily pressures of her job including

students, meetings, and administrative demands. Her comfort level in the

community had grown and she was able to share the negativities related to her

teaching. When I asked Katelyn about how she perceived herself she wrote, "I just want to be happy. There's my simple answer. I just want to do things that make me happy. A happy life is what everyone wants...."

After reading her journal, Katelyn discovered that she was negative when she wrote about her teaching but that the humor she used in her stories helped her overcome teaching obstacles in that they alleviated stress, and made light of serious situations. Katelyn valued teaching, and hoped she was an "inspiration to her students." She also realized that she might have changed careers last year if her preparations had not changed:

> Last year was a really difficult year when I taught three grade levels and I had no support with what I was doing and that was very difficult. I found myself becoming a teacher I didn't want to be. So this year I started with a brand new grade level, brand new room, started off with a brand new me which was really good because if I had stayed where I was last year, I would not have stayed a teacher.

Through her journal reflections, Katelyn had reinvented herself as a teacher who was motivated, eager, and happy to teach. Writing was a tool that helped her reflect upon who she was the previous year, and helped her scaffold herself into the teacher she wanted to be.

Like Charlie, upon exploring her family background, Katelyn discovered that her teaching was related to her experiences as a child. For example, on the first day of her NWP experience, she was terrified because she was surrounded by experienced teachers, and had just had a terrible teaching year:

I've been a really shy little kid. That stems back from having red hair and

freckles and I looked completely different from all kids growing up. Like

physical appearances I hated any attention because I didn't want to be made

fun of or anything.... It's weird when you don't look like everyone else.

Katelyn explained that although she was never teased for her appearance, she

was always the person who looked differently from everyone else and tried to hide

this. This was the reason that she liked teaching middle school:

In junior high everything is so social. Everyone cares about your clothes,

name brands, and that's why I love teaching middle school because I like to

try and make every kid feel good about themselves. I make myself look

stupid just to try to make them feel good about themselves...I think it's nice

because at my school I am the only teacher with red hair and freckles and

all my students are Hispanic, so I think it's good for them to see that I am

kind of different looking...

Katelyn's exterior led her into teaching middle school, a place that can be

awkward for students as their bodies and personalities are changing so quickly.

Katelyn interwove her teaching identity with her childhood experiences. She shared

her stories about growing up with red hair and freckles with her students and

explained that her students related to these stories because of their own experiences

in feeling awkward as teenagers. In this way storytelling was as much a part of

Katelyn's identity as a teacher as it was a part of our writing community. Stories

connected her to her students and let them know that everyone feels awkward in

different occasions.

Katelyn's Impressions of Herself as a Writer after the Writing Community.

In the first sessions of the writing community, Katelyn had trouble answering prompts about perceptions of herself as a writer because she did not believe that she was one. She used the metaphor of a *black hole* and *empty vacuum* to describe her writing identity. During the ninth session, however, she said that she had so many ideas that she was uncertain what to write about, and became frustrated with these decisions. When she shared her manuscript with the group, she said, "I've fallen in love with [this manuscript!]. I think that I'm pretty good at [writing satire]."This was the first time that Katelyn identified herself as a writer. It was different from earlier sessions in which she had hesitation about sharing her writing and told the group that she was not a writer. Katelyn remained consistent in her satirical writing voice, and continued to poke fun at herself in her journal entries, "So as a writer I am?! puzzled, and apparently incapable of writing that word."

When asked about presenting her writing at the National Council for Teachers of English Conference in earlier sessions she said repeatedly, "I don't know what I would share!" By the ninth session, Katelyn was sharing her writing on Googledocs, where a friend had added a fifth chapter to her book. She was eager to present her writing and stated, "I'm not sure what my school will think when this book comes out." By the end of the writing community Katelyn had writing goals and believed that her writing could be published. She attributed this change to the fact that she had the writing group, an audience who liked to hear her stories.

Katelyn explained that before the writing group she had things she wanted to say but wasn't certain who would want to read her writing. She explained,

As a writer the group has given me more confidence...I know I'm kind of

entertaining I know I like writing but now its given me some more

confidence having people laugh at my situation....[I would rate my]

confidence as a writer [before the group] as a three and now I'd probably

bump myself up to a six-seven. I had some validation. You guys enjoyed my

writing; you related to my writing. So what I'm doing actually served a

purpose.

By meeting in a writing community, Katelyn concocted a writing style and

voice that was unique. She also acknowledged that her stories were relatable to

others, "Sharing the writing made me change from a non-believer of [being a

writer] to being confident. I have never [needed others' approval] until now. I

needed to know that I was ok with [writing] and to keep going." To feel like a

writer Katelyn needed an audience who was supportive of her efforts and validated

that she was writing about meaningful topics; the writing group served that

capacity.

Katelyn discussed her role in the writing community in relation to the other

members:

I didn't take myself too seriously. I was there more for entertainment value.

Natasha was really gung ho and had a great idea and by all means she

should. She has a cause and she wants to go for it. Charlie was unsure [about

her writing]. She didn't really know what direction she wanted to go into

[with her writing]...I wanted to go with the lighter side of stuff.

When I asked Katelyn how her humorous writing affected the community she explained,

> It was a good contrast to the serious Natasha side of it and maybe gave
> Charlie a little bit of reassurance because I wasn't always sure what I was
> doing and her school was similar to mine, so it put a little more confidence
> into her writing, just knowing that we're dealing with kind of the same
> issues.

Like the other participants, Katelyn gained confidence from sharing her stories and valued the role she played within the writing group. The group remained non-competitive, a place where the teachers could share their writing and feel validated in their personal stories and experiences.

Katelyn explained that although she was not ready to share her writing with the public at an academic conference, she wanted to give herself a year to continue writing and then, if she was still motivated, apply to present her stories.

Initially during our interview, Katelyn explained that although she enjoyed the writing community she did not think it would work at her school:

> Maybe it would be a good outlet [for stress]. Would it ever happen at my
> school? Probably not because there is so much stress on test scores that there
> is no time for creative outlets. My school would not be for [the writing
> community].

However, at the end of our interview, Katelyn explained,

> It would be nice if teachers could kind of get together and [write in a group]
> at their school. If language arts teachers could get together and write about

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themselves and share themselves with others. It's very beneficial, especially for those who are going through rough patches or are going through tough years. Just knowing that they can write it out and have a nice outlet for it instead of bottling stuff up. It would be nice if there could be more communities within school but of course there's issues. When is there going to be time to do it? Are people going to see value in it? You don't want to force someone into doing something...

Like the other participants, Katelyn saw great value in writing with other teachers but was doubtful that the administrators at her school would make time for teachers to write with the emphasis on standardized testing, and rigid school routine.

We discussed the possibilities of a writing group with teachers of multiple disciplines, school secretaries, custodians and administrators to revisit the roles of why we were in school and to cut through the rat race of education. Katelyn explained,

I'd like to see the different views of the community. See how the ladies in the office feel, what the custodians are thinking right now, what the math department thinks. The principals' actual true feelings. They give you so much BS; like cut through it and just be honest!

Writing groups presented themselves as a way to attain honesty and integrity in school communities where falseness prevailed.

Natasha

Like the other participants, Natasha was in her mid-twenties. She spoke less than the other participants during our sessions. When she did, it was in advocacy for her special education students. She called herself a social activist who stood up against a school system that built up barriers for her students. Natasha wrote,

> I am a 26 year old teacher with shoulder-length brown hair and hazel eyes. I am of average height and thin. To most people, I seem quiet at first. This is because I am very thoughtful and I pay close attention to what is happening around me. While I might not seem talkative, I am a reflective person who is always listening. I am very passionate about issues of social justice, and this comes through in my personality; I am dedicated to what I do, and I stand up for what I believe is right. Aside from this, I have a quirky sense of humor and I love to laugh. Perhaps this is why I get along so well with junior high students.

Natasha's Teaching Background and First Experience with Writing.

Natasha was drawn into teaching through the Teach for America program. She has taught for four years in a Title I school that is 94% free and reduced lunch. She is a seventh to eighth grade resource teacher for reading, writing, and mathematics classes and works in a reading intervention program at her school.

Natasha had a different teaching experience from the other members, "I did not student teach before entering the classroom and I did not have a degree in education before I got my Masters in special education...." Natasha earned her master's degree during her first two years of teaching. She applied to teach at her middle school

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because she wanted to make changes in her community. "I want to work with low-income, special education students because they are the most disenfranchised and neglected students in our educational system."

She explained,

> My school is killing me basically. Killing my spirit. Every staff meeting people are shouting and fighting with each other and I just love the kids. I love the students and that's why I keep staying at this school... Dealing with the adults that I work with, there's just so much nonsense and ridiculous stuff that goes on. I feel like I'm constantly doing other stuff and I just want to work with my students. I want to stay after school and tutor my students. I'm forced to go to all these meetings that are pointless and I'm just sitting there.

Unlike the other participants, Natasha wrote regularly during her undergraduate education: "I was an English and women's studies major during my undergraduate program. I wrote my senior thesis on gender constructs in *The House of Mirth*." Natasha also writes a blog about living vegan, that she initiated after her participation during the 2010 NWP summer institute. She admitted that she had no time to write on her blog once the school year began. Natasha's writing and teaching were connected to social activism.

When Natasha began teaching she wanted to make kids feel as comfortable as possible with writing, by having them write frequently. She gave her students journals in which they could write about whatever topics they wanted. She took these journals home on Fridays and responded to her students' entries over the

weekend. "The kids started writing about really personal things and it helped me develop relationships with the kids, who were a difficult bunch." In providing her students with journals Natasha served as a literacy sponsor (Brandt, 2001).

Natasha's Impressions of Herself as a Teacher Prior to the Writing Community.

When I asked her to provide a metaphor that described her as a teacher, Natasha wrote,

> I don't know if there is even a real clear metaphorical representation.... I am very strict, but also nurturing to my students. My students have jokingly referred to me as "Mo" because I go out of my way to help them in all areas of their education, but I also become very disappointed if they make poor choices or choose not to live up to their potential. I will stand up for my students to the administration and other staff members. The culture of the school has changed because I do not tolerate bullying of special education students. Some of my students spend four classes in my room and attend tutoring with me after school. I go to their sporting events after school and on the weekends. They call me for help whenever they need it. My former students still invite me to their birthday parties and come to me with their problems. Some of my students don't have parents or family members they can trust or talk to. If a student is in my class, I will go out of my way to help them be successful, and I will continue to do that even after they leave my classroom.

Natasha viewed herself as a social activist who protected her ELD students from a cruel world.

Like Katelyn, this identity was rooted in her personal experiences:

My brother [Mike] has autism and he didn't receive basically any services. My other brother has a learning disability. I became a teacher through Teach for America and I got assigned special ed. and it was like really serendipitous because of my background experience of it in my own life. When I came into special education I saw how horrible it was. It just infuriated me.

She continued,

A lot of teachers would not give Mike accommodations. They would think that my mom was just dramatic and didn't want her son to be pushed too hard....They didn't understand that it was a disability. ...A lot of teachers feel this way about that...a lot of teachers feel like that like the students that I have are just being lazy. They don't understand what an actual disability is. I spend a lot of time [training students and teachers] on special ed. What is special ed? Why are we here?

Today, Natasha's autistic brother, Mike, has a social phobia. He does not leave his parents' house because of it. Although he tried to attend college, Mike had to drop out because of these fears. Mike's only escape is his artwork, which he illustrates to alleviate his stress from his fear of people. Natasha's other brother, Dan, was scheduled to graduate from college. Natasha saw how arduous the process

was for Dan to fill out college applications and wanted to help her students work through the tasks that everyday people take for granted.

Despite her perception of herself as a social activist she admitted that she had given up trying to change colleagues at her school who were unkind to ELD students. She encouraged her students to avoid getting into those teachers' classes and focused on advocating for their rights to new teachers, whom she believed were more open to change. Natasha had become frustrated with her school district as well. For example, her students had selected social justice topics and illustrated artwork connected to them to encourage the community to make a change regarding environmental and social issues. This work was praised by school district personnel, who invited her to attend a board meeting. The school board was going to discuss this work at a board meeting and post it for the community to see in the district office. This never happened because too many people were on the board's agenda; her class had been eliminated from the discussion. Natasha hoped to talk to her district about this but had not had the time to do so. Natasha continuously encouraged her students to be their own advocates and ask for special education accommodations if they were not receiving them.

Natasha had a clear definition of her role as an educator, unlike Katelyn and Charlie, who were searching for their teaching and writing identities.

Natasha's Impression of Herself as a Writer Prior to the Writing Community.

Although she believed that she was a strong writer Natasha explained, "I don't always feel like I am writing anything that people could care to read."

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When asked to write a metaphor for herself as a writer, Natasha stated,

[I am a] fountain brimming with ideas. Persistent, passionate, thoughtful, reflective, introspective, justice-seeking. Writing comes easily to me. I am a hiker/mountain climber seeking a certain goal, an artist working with words to convince people I help people see truth; my writing is clear and to the point. It illuminates a certain message about society. Socially-driven. [I] raise social consciousness.

Natasha connected her activist writing to her experiences with her brothers:

I have the activist agenda in my writing. I want to show people how to change things through their teaching and how to include everybody in their classroom and service a population that is disenfranchised always no matter what kind of school you're at. I come from a background where my brothers went to a really nice school and my brothers didn't receive great services, and now I'm working in a not so nice school and seeing the same exact thing.

Natasha was confident in both her teaching and writing identity. She saw herself as a source of wisdom who could provide knowledge to the public about educational dilemmas both in and outside of her classroom.

Natasha's Impression of Herself as a Teacher after the Writing Community.

Natasha continuously saw herself as a teacher activist; this perception remained constant from the first to the last writing group session.

During the ninth session of the group, she said that she mentored her family and her students and kept them motivated in a world that was often unkind to them. She connected her vegan diet and blog to her teaching and remained steadfast in her beliefs that she was different from other teachers, who were often cruel and unkind to their challenging students. She continued to other herself from the teachers at her school and saw herself as a guardian to her students. In her journal she wrote,

> ...my classroom is different from others in the school. The kids feel comfortable there. I try to make it theirs as much as possible. I do not walk into other rooms and find pictures of students [like in my room] on the [other teachers' walls...The kids have a greater degree of autonomy in my classroom than elsewhere at the school, because, for the most part, once we have established my procedures and expectations, I trust that they will do what they have to in order to get what they need accomplished.

Natasha believed that it was this trust that set her apart from the other teachers in her school.

In an earlier session Natasha wrote,

> I will stand up for my students to the administration and other staff members. The culture of the school has changed because I do not tolerate the bullying of special education students...Some of my students don't have parents or family members they can trust or talk to. If a student is in my class, I will go out of my way to help them be successful, and I will continue to do that even after they leave my classroom.

This coheres with the metaphor of motherliness that Natasha used to describe her teaching throughout the group sessions.

Natasha's Impression of Herself as a Writer after the Writing Community.

Natasha's opinions of herself did not change. However, the first time that she had written extensively since her NWP summer institute was during our writing sessions. Like her teaching, Natasha saw herself as a writing activist who promoted change. By session three, however, she was more realistic about this role: "I fear losing my passion for teaching and writing." She also wrote that she was uncertain how long she could keep fighting for her students before she quit her job. This suggests a comfort that she felt with the group as the sessions progressed. Similar to Katelyn, she was less optimistic in her comments on her teaching and writing.

Natasha was interested in publishing both her NWP manuscript and the narrative she had written in the group. She was not sure where her writing could be published and solicited feedback on this. She was interested in sharing her activist writing with the public and, like Katelyn, hoped that her writing would be published. During the last session, Natasha stated that she had shared her experiences in the writing community with her students, and told her students that she wrote stories about them. This was the first time that Natasha had shared her personal writing with her class.

After attending the writing community sessions, Natasha began to practice her writing. Before, she saw herself as a writing activist. Afterward she had started writing in a journal and continued writing politically outside of the group. This was

also the first time that she had looked back at her writing from her NWP summer institute. However, she still had inhibitions as a writer:

> For me writing is instrumental to change. As a writer I [wondered] who would read what I write? I'm confident as a writer. I think I'm a good writer. When I was in college I was a women's studies major and I had a lot more confidence...in my writing because I was writing for a specific purpose. I had to write a paper. Now if I'm writing something I'm like, "Why am I writing this?" I don't have that same confidence because I don't know that somebody is actually going to read it.

Natasha said that although she felt uncertain about who her audience for her writing might be, she was writing more since the group sessions, "Now that I have actually done writing with people saying they have liked it... [it] gets me back in the mode of writing. I can do [writing] it's more realistic." This is similar to Katelyn, who also felt more confident once she met in a writing community that served as her audience.

> When asked about how she fit into the writing community, Natasha explained,
> I felt like what I was writing was trying to say how great I was or something...A lot of the writing [from the other members] was sarcastic and complaining and that's not how I write. Sometimes when it was about special education students I'd try not to judge people, but that was how I felt in the group. I felt like [at] times when I was reading my piece that [the group] felt like I was judging them as a special ed. teacher and they were the two gen ed. teachers so I came from a different perspective.

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Natasha admitted that she judged her group mates negatively when they wrote sarcastically about their students, particularly Katelyn's satire which made commentary about special education students. Natasha did not share her opinion in those moments because she feared looking like a *goody-two-shoes.* Even though Natasha felt completely comfortable sharing her writing with the group, and trusted its members, she felt that she had to keep her comments to herself to avoid conflict regarding her special education students.

Like the other participants, Natasha believed that writing communities would be valuable to have in her school so that teachers could reflect upon their teaching, and share their ideas, although she admitted that some teachers might be reluctant to participate due to their teaching obligations, and administrative duties.

Highlights of the Community of Practice Conversation

This section highlights illustrative moments and data from our four person conversations. Sessions were themed as the following:

- Session 1: The preliminaries of the writing community

- Session 2: Defining community

- Session 3: Defining ourselves

- Session 4: Exploring ourselves through personal artifacts

- Session 5: Uncovering our identities and integrity

- Session 6: Reconnecting the self

- Session 7: Exploring our classrooms

- Session 8: Exploring the heart

- Session 9: Revisiting the self

- Session 10: Celebrations and successes

Session 1: The preliminaries of the writing community.

The goal of session 1 was for the teachers to brainstorm writing projects that they would pursue in the community sessions. Participants visited different academic journals to explore call for manuscripts for writing ideas. Participants also visited future session information (see Appendix B) and were asked if they would be interested in any of the writing activities listed. The participants wanted the time to write manuscripts of their selection each week and still explore the prompts for 10-15 minutes during the sessions. Lastly, the participants completed the demographic profile.

In response to Lynn Nilsen's *river of thoughts* (as qtd. in Harrison, 1999, p. 98), I asked the participants to comment on the quotation. Charlie jumped in, "I always tell my students to be honest. When you are doing a pre-write about a classmate and you really don't like them, be honest about that."

Katelyn explained that her students struggle with writing personal details but that good writing has to *come from within*. Natasha continued,

> I agree with that. I have a lot of boys in my class; junior high boys don't write about feelings and actually, they'll start getting angry when I ask them sometimes...they can't even describe how they felt because no one's ever asked them that before, and they've been taught that they're supposed to be tough in their community, and their culture....

None of the teachers commented on their writing abilities, and immediately internalized the quote to be about their students and writing instruction. I brought

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this up to the group and stated, "When I was a classroom teacher I never had time to write," in past tense. I retracted this statement and explained that once I was a PhD student I had started writing and rediscovered that I liked to write. My identity as a secondary teacher was placed in the background while I discussed the writing process. This may be due to the difficulties of navigating both roles--K-12 teacher and writer, simultaneously.

Next, I asked the members if they wrote. Katelyn explained,

I'll be honest, I don't have time.... I actually prefer to sit down and read a book. But with the [National] Writing Project I actually really liked writing in a journal, and if you keep in the habit of it, it's easy to do it. If you make time, it's fine but if you don't make time in your schedule, it's really tough to do.

Katelyn explained that writing was therapeutic. Natasha continued,

After the [National] Writing Project I kept doing the journal but not in the same way. I'd be like I'm really mad right now, let me write this down. I started doing a blog this summer; I like to write. Now that I am back in school I have no time to do the blogging....

Katelyn wanted to write a collection of funny, crazy incidents at work. She explained that she had gone through so many difficult, unbelievable experiences as a teacher that she wanted to show the humorous side of teaching, including poor decisions made by administrators and staff, and fun moments with her students.

Natasha wanted to write reflectively about the same issues that Katelyn had discussed. She was concerned about her special education students. She said that at

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one point she wanted to leave the profession to become a social activist, but later

realized that, "... teaching is being a social activist."

Charlie explained, "I put down random ideas. I saw disconnect between my

teacher preparation college classes and how it really is in schools. The world that

they are teaching at the university does not exist." She continued, "I am obsessed

with my ELD [English as a second language] class; they are so stinking cute."

Charlie explained that she might also like to write about getting her kids to love

reading. "[In general] I want to write about the importance of having a daily

conversation with your kids."

Charlie explained, "This may sound stupid, but I quit. I got tired of hearing

about [the National Boards] all of the time."

Katelyn explained that her administrators did nothing to bring their staff

together. "How do we promote an environment of welcoming kids when no one

knows each other?"

The conversation defined what communities were not. It was clear that their

schools were compartmentalized, and their relationships with many of their

colleagues were unfriendly. The descriptions of their schools reminded me of how a

prisoner must feel who is locked in chains. In a sense, I felt like an advocate for the

group. I wanted their voices to be heard by the public both in written and spoken

form. I hoped the writing group would afford the teachers that opportunity.

The group remained supportive of one another. For example, Katelyn gave

Charlie some advice on collecting data in her classroom. I encouraged all of the

teachers to keep a teaching journal if they wanted to capture critical moments and

student quotes in their classrooms, and told them I would purchase these for them if they wanted. As Katelyn was leaving the session she stated, "I hope that our session helps you with your writing."

I replied, "You're helping me if you are helping you," to which Katelyn responded, "I like that!"

Session 2: Defining community.

The goal of session 2 was for the community members to define the concept of community through writing and speaking, and then to begin writing their self selected manuscripts.

I began the session with a couple of questions that I had on numbers four and five of the demographic profile which ask, (a) How long do you wish to continue teaching and (b) How long do you plan to stay at your current school? Charlie wrote that she planned on staying at her school but may want to transfer to a different school in the district. When I asked her to clarify this comment in our session she said that although she got along with the three people on her fifth grade team, one of these teachers was competitive and expected her to work at a pace that was too fast for her. She was friends with the colleague, who was in her wedding, but had trouble working with her:

> I get upset because she is organized and so perfect. Truly...she has
> everything done and is there way before I am. She leaves way after I [do].
> Finally, we had a discussion that "you're being kind of a micromanager. I
> don't want you to be in charge of me, I want to be in charge of myself."

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Natasha clarified her profile on statement number four. Upon being asked how long she wanted to teach Natasha said,

> My school is just killing me basically, killing my spirit. It's so toxic. Every staff meeting there are people shouting and fighting with each other. And I love working with the kids...so I keep staying at this school because I'm really close with the kids and I like the main part of my job but dealing with the adults that I work with it's just so much nonsense...They make more work than is necessary and I feel like I'm constantly doing other stuff. My focus is [on] my students. I want to stay after school and tutor my students, but instead, I'm forced to go to all these meetings that are pointless....

Charlie concurred with this statement.

Natasha continued, "I don't want to become one of those old teachers whose fed up and burned out."

This initiated into a conversation about Charlie and Natasha's school communities, which they described as being places of *forced collaboration.* Charlie said, "We are forced to collaborate with our team in certain ways." The data driven, competitive teams that her administration had built made for unproductive, debilitative, *depressing* communities.

Natasha interjected, "We're given tests that are written at an eighth grade level that I have to administer to my special education students that don't really tell me anything." She explained that the assessments reaffirm that her students score poorly, but do not help her teach the students more effectively. When I asked Natasha if she ever had any input on these assessments she explained that with the

No Child Left Behind law, all tests had to be the same. Natasha argued that she had lived with these issues for five years and that she had become *burnt out.*

Natasha also explained that the kindergarten to sixth grade staff at her school ostracized the seventh and eighth grade teachers including herself. This segued into our journal prompt:

> Define what you believe is a community. Please name some other communities that have mattered to you. What components did they have that made them a community? How are these communities the same or different from the schools in which you work?

After writing for 10 minutes, the group discussed their responses. Charlie wrote about two types of communities, those that people choose to attend and those that they are forced to attend. She said that her running team was the most supportive community in her life, because they support one another, even though they know each others' weaknesses. "I know when Joanne [a runner on the team] is getting tired and then we'll just walk for a minute." When I asked Charlie how the team was different from her school she explained,

> No matter what, I choose to be a part of the running team; it's my choice so it's more enjoyable. I can see the end in sight. I'm working toward a specific goal and [a]day that the goal will need to be accomplished...unlike the teaching community where really it's just this vague goal; it's not broken up into these mini goals and we're not really supportive of each other.

It bothered Charlie that each grade level's test scores were compared in an attempt to raise students' scores and make teachers compete with each other. This

perpetuated an unwelcoming and tense teaching environment, "With the running team no one has [an against each other] mentality because we're all coming in at different levels...and [we're] supporting the levels that each person is at, not looking down upon the new runner."

Natasha wrote about music groups that she had been a member of. She explained that each musician played an integral role in the band and that they relied on each other just like school communities. Like schools, if one band member was missing, the group fell apart. Similar to Charlie, Natasha believed that choosing the community she was a part of was important. "If I were in a music group, in college, and I didn't like the group members, I could just walk away. Teachers, they cannot walk away...."

Participants said that their school communities were places of entrapment where they were forced to congregate even though none of them wanted to be there. When I asked participants about how the communities that they enjoyed were different from their schools' communities Charlie explained, "You can't be truthful in some communities. I can be really honest in the running team because I'm friends with them." In Charlie's school community one of her competitive colleagues was "taking over [Charlie's] identity." This contradicts Palmer and Livsey's (1999) first component of a "A community of truth" (p. 6), which argues that healthy teaching communities encourage open and honest conversations.

Charlie explained that she could not be herself in her school, and sometimes her classroom, because she had to conform to a community that did not represent who she was.

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Natasha stated,

> I work alone a lot. I end up being an island in my classroom. I need
>
> everyone in my community to do the job but I choose to stay by myself most
>
> of the time. In the music group, you were always together.

I asked the teachers what they wanted from our writing community. It was difficult for the teachers to articulate this, and the group sat in silence. After a long pause Charlie replied, "When we start writing our pieces, honest and critical feedback. I really want to become a better writer so I want someone to be honest with me, but also make suggestions."

Next, I disseminated and read aloud Livsey and Palmer's (1999) description of community to the teachers. Their components of a community include a place that is non-institutional, safe, and intellectual, where people are not ridiculed, an emotional space that allows for teachers to share their stories with integrity and truth, and a spiritual place in which participants do not try to fix one another (pp. 6-11). It was apparent that the participants' school communities were the antithesis of this definition as they worked in institutions where they felt that they were being *fixed* by their colleagues and administrators. Policy makers and school officials often view education from a deficit perspective in that students and teachers need to be corrected to achieve something. I was left to wonder, where is there room for the special education teacher, or the first year teacher who doesn't run the race the fastest?

I asked for the teachers to comment on how this passage connected or did not connect to their schools. Charlie described hostile teachers. Natasha summarized

her first year as a teacher in her school; she wanted her classroom to serve as a sanctuary for her students. She adorned the walls with pictures, and warm colors. "If you're not comfortable how are you going to write or try anything new, or open yourself up?"

The first year that Natasha had arrived at her school, she described it as "teaching in the closet" with no desks and garbage from other classrooms tossed into it. She explained that the special education teacher, the year prior, had disseminated worksheets to his students and slept in the corner while they sat on the floor, doing little. Natasha was outraged by this and with the help of a colleague, accumulated furniture from different areas in the school, and proceeded to build her special education community. This experience fueled her passion for social justice issues and made her an advocate for her special education students.

Charlie described her classroom as "a space that is non-existent." She explained that she had 34 desks in a small classroom in which she and her students could not move. What is the affect on a teacher's identity when they do not have a space that works for their classroom communities? If the space is small and secluded does that make the teacher also feel small? Natasha used isolationist speech to describe her community with words like *island* and *in the closet*. These phrases connoted that her school was oppressive.

I steered the conversation back to the four aspects of community that Livsey and Palmer (1999) mention, particularly the need to be one's self. Charlie talked about a faculty meeting at her school the previous Friday, August 19th. The meeting was convened to discuss how students should be reading the same texts, at the same

time, throughout same grade level teachers' classrooms. She continued in an elevated, angry voice:

> We're listening to this and there's no time to discuss anything. Like a normal discussion. They want us to teach in a certain way that's not really, again, who I am. I'm not trying to make my kids a robot.

Natasha felt the same way about her school. "Basically I just don't [conform] because it makes me really angry...."

When I asked why the teachers did not address these concerns with their school leaders Natasha responded, "It's not worth it. No one's really going to do anything if I don't [conform]...."

Charlie continued,

> I always try [to conform] I really do. Because I think maybe I will enjoy it...I'm just seeing how it goes but usually I just can't be fake. The students can see it when you aren't being who you truly are. ...[Administration] doesn't follow up on it if you're [not] following the rules.

Both teachers said it was important that they were themselves in their classrooms.

Next, the conversation strayed from teaching identity to writing identity. I asked, "Do you see yourselves as writers? Do you feel you have a writing identity?"

There was silence. Charlie spoke up after a long pause,

> Right now I feel really unconfident, especially after our summer writing program. I still don't really feel confident as a writer. I like writing and I have fun with it, but I am so horrible at grammar.

Natasha explained,

> In college I was an English major and I was really confident as a writer and
> I still am, but a college writer. Now I am shifting into another type of
> writing and I don't have an identity right now.

When I asked her what the other type of writing she was shifting into was she explained, "I don't know. Like teaching, blogging...."

Participants spent the next 25 minutes writing pieces of their selection. Afterward, the group came back together to share their drafts. Charlie wrote about a boy described as *creepy* by one of her colleagues. She explained that the student looked like, "A creepy homeless man who wants to kill you." She wanted to conduct a case study on this student, taking observations down in her journal, during the week, outside of the group. The student had been neglected by his previous teachers and allowed to sleep in class. Charlie was determined to not let this happen. Her writing digressed into various subjects related to school including parent phone calls and two students who were bored with her instructional assistant. I encouraged Charlie to take her journal to class with her and record observations about this student.

Natasha wrote about the first classroom that she had inherited from her school five years ago. She explained that the classroom was devoid of furniture, had garbage piled in it, and that the students previous year's students had been left to sit in the corner, and do worksheets, while their special education teacher slept. She tried to make the classroom welcoming for her students, and asked teachers for extra furniture. She went to Office Max asking for donations. Natasha felt alone in

this journey, and identified herself as an advocate for her students, "Since I started working at this school there is no way that this would happen again because I would go bizerk." The students were a difficult group for her to teach because they had been *left in the closet* and were angry. Natasha still kept in touch with these students.

For the last five minutes of the session, I asked participants to look over week three's activities from the schedule, and circle anything that they might be interested in doing at the next session. I emphasized that the activities would be of their selection, and that they could choose to write for the entire 90 minutes if they wished. Participants were interested in doing quick-writes on the topics listed in the schedule, but wanted to spend the majority of the time writing their pieces.

There is a false feeling within the teachers' school communities rather than honesty and truthfulness, which the teachers explained were integral to successful schools. The participants loved their students, but felt that to survive, that they needed to keep up the appearance that they were playing the game of school; committing to communities that were dysfunctional, and pacing their lessons according to administrators' guidelines.

I received Katelyn's responses via e-mail on September 4, 2011. Upon asking her to define what she believes is a community Katelyn wrote,

> To me, a community does not have a certain function. It can be any type of environment where people either willingly come together to share a certain cause or belief, or it can be an environment where people do not willingly come or participate. A community is what the individual makes of it.

Like Charlie and Natasha, Katelyn explained that the communities that have mattered the most to her were those in which she was a willing participant. In particular, she reflected upon her first place of employment:

My first job at a community center (how appropriate) is definitely one of the places I have felt most at home and comfortable, besides my own home of course. It is that feeling of belonging and sense of pride that makes a place more than just a work place; it makes it community.

Similar to the other participants, Katelyn wrote that her school community was unpleasant due to stressful constraints. This stress made it "...hard to concentrate on what matters." She explained,

Having supportive friends and people that struggle with you is the key to getting through the stress. At my school; however, four of my really great friends have moved away or gone to other schools, and it gets really tough knowing that they are not there to share in my misery and joy. So what differs between my favorite communities and my school community? Stability.

Upon reflecting on Livsey and Palmer's (1999) traits of a community, Katelyn wrote that when she had first started her teaching position she was on a team with seven other teachers. Once those teachers had left; however, her school community was altered.

In her journal she wrote,

With the loss of some friends and the merger with another school, my school community has drastically changed, and that is what makes it

difficult for me. The place I loved is no longer the same. That is hard to
adapt to.

Katelyn explained that she is not sure what role she fulfills in her present school community. With the increase in demands in teaching, her role has changed, "I am more focused on work than socializing."

Katelyn said that her writing has been a "personal outlet for stress." She continued, "I definitely need to do more...[writing], and I can see myself actually doing that this year [with the writing group]."

The complexities displayed in the teachers' school communities were perplexing. It appeared that none of them were completely confident with their writing. Their voices had been stifled for so long by their schools, both in terms of curriculum and of creativity, that the teachers, particularly Charlie and Katelyn, felt lost as educators, and had not had a chance to develop themselves as writers.

Session 3: Defining ourselves.

The goal of session 3 was for participants to explore their perceptions of themselves as teachers and as writers. In order to excavate this complexity, the participants were asked to journal about metaphors that represented who they were as educators and as writers.

I asked participants if there was any part of their writing they would like to share. Charlie had brainstormed a piece about writing in her ELD classroom. Katelyn brainstormed *silly* stories at her school. These included tales about the strange people who become teachers, and stories about their *crazy backgrounds.* She described her topics as *stupid stuff like that.*

Natasha wrote about "the most challenging student" that she or anyone at her school had ever instructed. She taught him in her eighth grade class when he couldn't read at all, and his behavior was out of control. Natasha was trying to find out what happened to him as he had stopped calling her. She found out, from another student, that the boy had switched high schools as a 12th grader. She was trying to locate him. I suggested that she call his old school to make contact with him.

I asked the teachers if they could have a draft printed for group editing by session 5, October 4th. They were hesitant and said that they were still brainstorming. I reaffirmed that this was fine, that one page of a draft that we could edit would be ok. Charlie asked, "I just write about things because I want to write about them. Is this what you are looking for?" She was surprised that she could write about what she wished. I explained that I was looking for what they were looking for. "I want to find out about what happens when teachers are given the opportunity to write. Your goals are my goals."

Next, teachers wrote to the following prompt in their journals:

> What is a metaphor that conceptualizes who you are as a teacher? What is a
> metaphor that conceptualizes who you are as a writer? How does this
> metaphor change as a result of being a part of a writing community?

I gave the girls 15 minutes to answer the prompt. I told them that if they preferred writing on their other pieces they could do that instead, and that they need not answer the prompt.

Once they had finished writing, Charlie was the first to share. She said that she felt new to both writing and teaching. "I find one thing in common with both [teaching and writing], that I'm new to it, which sounds silly because I've written all of my life and I've taught for four years."

Katelyn wrote about a maze as a metaphor for her teaching:

I'm along a right path but sometimes I hit a dead end. Once I know my way I'll get through the maze but right now I feel so stuck in this maze. Sometimes I'm on the right path and then sometimes I run into a wall.

When I asked Katelyn why she felt stuck, she explained,

I know I like teaching but I don't know if I will stay in it awhile. If it was just teaching kids, it would be awesome, it would be awesome! It's so many other things that I didn't sign up for....

The other participants nodded in agreement.

Natasha's metaphor for her teaching was parenting. She explained that some of her students are with her for four hours a day:

They spend a lot of time with me; it's always been a joke [but kids will say], "Ok, Mom." I'm that kind of teacher. I go out of my way to make sure that they're successful whether they're in my classroom or not.... They know that I'm also there for them but I'm super strict too.

She continued,

It makes you wonder if you should look for something else. You have burnt out teachers who just collect a pay check and I don't want to be like that. If I am then I need to quit teaching, and I need to find something else. My fear

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is that I'm losing my drive to be a teacher and that I'm becoming a sucky

teacher. I'm not there of course, but I don't want to lose the insight of myself

and become one of those horrible teachers.

The teachers commented on how the economy and current educational climate made for a particularly trying time to be an educator.

Charlie interjected, "I thought of my metaphor now, a circus leader, because I am running the entire time. I go up to this student, [then I] run over here..." She talked about the many tasks that she performed randomly at a fast pace.

Natasha chimed in, "Yeah, it's true, I feel like the Tasmanian Devil or something." Katelyn and Charlie interjected that teaching made it difficult to carry a conversation with their spouse and boyfriend after work because they were so exhausted and their attention spans were spent. It was clear that teaching was personally taxing. As Katelyn explained, "When I get home, I'm on overload...."

We discussed the following: "Who do you fear becoming as a teacher? Who do you fear becoming as a writer?" Katelyn feared having a bad educator like her math teacher, who had taught her little. "To this day I still don't know geometry."

Natasha feared becoming like the teacher next door to her during her first year of teaching:

I could hear her putting the kids down through the walls. Especially the kids

from my class. She would tell them that they were stupid and that they

couldn't do anything...she was constantly putting down anyone who spoke

Spanish. She'd sit at the desk the whole day and the kids had worksheets

they did. Any time you walked into her classroom she was just sitting at the

desk. I don't know what she was doing. I know I'll never become like that

since I'm not an idiot, but anywhere near that, just feeling like getting angry

in class because of other stuff...I don't want that to happen to me.

Charlie feared becoming impatient in the classroom:

I'm not like that in person, but I feel so much pressure coming down on me

to get all these kids to meet the objectives so...that's why I'm a circus leader.

"Get this out, get this out, are you ready?" And I don't want it to get to the

point where I'm being mean but I just feel, I hope that never happens to me.

Natasha also feared becoming complacent in her teaching because her principal

never visited her classroom. "It would be really easy for me to lower my standards."

Her goal was for her students to attain two years of academic growth every school

year. She explained that it "is hard to keep this up" and that she feared becoming

too tired to continue with this teaching position.

I steered the participants toward the second part of the prompt, which was who

they feared becoming as a writer. Katelyn did not think of herself as a writer. She

explained that she was a teacher who occasionally wrote so she could not relate to

the question. Charlie explained that she never wanted to lose her passion for writing

and sharing her pieces with her students. A new writing program that she was

forced to implement with her ELD students kept her from sharing her writing with

her class like she had in previous school years. Natalie said she became really

angry when she was writing about her classroom. She said that she wanted to tell

her stories passionately but feared sounding too *preachy*.

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We visited week four's prompt on bringing a personal object(s) to the next session that might represent us as teachers and as writers. I asked the participants if they were interested in doing this, or if they wanted to work on their pieces for the entire 90 minutes. The teachers wanted to bring the objects so we agreed to keep those prompts at 15 minutes, and then have the rest of the time to work on our independent writing.

Session 4: Exploring ourselves through personal artifacts.

The goal of session 4 was for participants to explore their identities as teachers and as writers through objects that they brought to the session. In connection with the metaphors that teachers developed last week, the use of objects was a springboard for participants to explore their self perceptions.

I asked the teachers to journal on the objects that they agreed to bring last week that symbolized who they were as educators and as writers: "What objects did you bring? What do they signify about you? What do they signify about your perceptions of yourself as a teacher? What do they signify about your perceptions of yourself as a writer?" After 10 minutes, I gave the girls a three minute time limit to finish their writing.

Charlie brought a cotton ball in to symbolize her teaching identity:

> This represents me as a teacher because this is what we use to earn our
> parties in my classroom. I have a little jar and we fill up the jar for our party
> points. But it's not just a party, really it represents me. I'm a really
> demanding teacher especially this year, more than ever. My expectations are
> almost unattainable but the kids are doing so well and every time I reach a

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goal, I put in a party point so not only does it show that I am demanding, but

I'm always positive. We're learning about complex sentences and they're

writing all the time now! I'm just positive, positive, positive.

Charlie's face lit up when she spoke about her students. It made me wonder if

she was almost convincing herself to be positive with the way she affirmed this trait

four times. She had stated the week previously that in her classroom she often felt

disempowered and controlled by political decisions. I wondered if the cotton ball,

with its stark whiteness and uniformity was part of this concept. Charlie was

positive but did she feel free?

Katelyn and I both liked the concept of the party points and discussed trying this

with our older students. I am a little reluctant about this, however, because of the

heavy reliance on extrinsic motivation.

Charlie brought in a Crayola marker that represented herself as a writer when

she was a child:

When I think of myself as a writer, every time, I immediately think back to

my childhood and me writing. I wrote about how when I was a kid I can

remember my mom being like, are you done? I would just be so into it. The

counter would be covered with markers, covered with glitter, covered with

crayons, cause I would be so into making picture books. I would be so into

the writing and illustrations that I wanted it to be perfect.

Both of Charlie's objects were childlike, playful and part of her classroom. Her

writing was an integral part of her teaching. Interestingly, her writing identity was

nostalgic, a memory from the past that was cemented in her childhood. It placed her

in a young, immature role. I was curious if writing in our community would allow for her to feel like an adult writer.

Katelyn shared her object next. A student had brought back a ceramic jar from Las Vegas to her during her first year of teaching:

It was one of the first useful things I got. It's pretty to look at but useful, like me. I like how love is written all over it. Every time I look at it I think about that girl, and I think about that first year of students. I loved my first year of teaching. It was three different blocks of classes. Those kids were my favorite and I don't know if it was because it was my first year of teaching or what, but every time I look at it I think of those kids, and I also think about those teachers I had working around me. I had the best year possible. If it wasn't for those teachers and those kids around me it would have been pretty difficult, but I loved my first year of teaching. This signified that no matter how bad [teaching] gets...I know it can be ok. It also reminded me of how hard I worked that first year of teaching because I know I have not worked as hard [since that first year of teaching].

Katelyn explained,

I couldn't think of what to bring for myself as a writer and I thought that [not bringing an object] was perfect because I don't know who I am as a writer, so I don't know what I could have brought that actually would have made sense. So what I brought is actually nothingness. It signifies that I am confused about who I am as a writer. As a little kid I liked to write stories,

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I've kind of grown out of it. I know I'm growing back into it, but I don't

know where I stand now.

Katelyn's teaching object was nostalgic. It reminded her of her better teaching days and the students and staff who were supportive of her. Like Charlie, her memory of writing was associated with her identity as a child. Neither her nor Charlie brought up the National Writing Project as a place where they felt like writers. Their institute was just a year and a half ago, yet they associated their earlier memories of writing with who they were with their writing today. This suggests that they saw their writing as immature and, perhaps, that they believed it had not evolved since their childhood.

Next, Natasha shared her objects:

I brought my teacher's scrapbook. It has letters that students have written

me. I'm super organized and pretty neat so I made a scrapbook. It has

pictures that students drew and just different stuff over the years. It has our

class newsletters that we've written.... There's a huge sign in it from the last

year from the students thanking me. I brought this because sometimes it

seems like I don't really know if I'm getting through to the kids or making a

difference in their lives and when I look back at some of the things that kids

have given me, other teachers think that they're the worst kids I get these

letters written about how I've changed their life or whatever This is tangible

evidence that this is what we've accomplished as a class. The relationships

that I establish with the kids, that's what's really important to me.

Natasha continued,

The object for me [as a teacher] is the same for me as a writer. The way I measure my impact as a writer is my impact on others; like I'm using my writing as a tool for social justice so this is what I brought for myself as a writer as well.

The scrapbook fascinated me with its quirkiness. Students wrote criticisms about Natasha such as, "You're mean" and then in the next instant, complimented her for being such a great teacher and always believing in them. Some students changed topics. Some students wrote that Natasha was skinny with a big forehead and other students thanked her for helping them with her math homework. It was insightful to read these comments and made me teary eyed. So this was what teaching special education was like. I had prejudged it to be excruciatingly monotonous based on my experiences with my autistic brother's school experiences; these students were so warm, loving and sweet in their writing.

Natasha's artifacts were the same for both her teaching and writing identity. She was the only community member who converged these two identities. The rest of us felt differently about who we were as teachers and as writers. Perhaps Natasha's identity as a writer and teacher were more solidified. Both Katelyn and Natasha selected artifacts that reminded them of their students; Charlie's object was connected to herself as a teacher and her curriculum. Also, Charlie's marker and Natasha's scrapbook were writing artifacts. One was a display of students' writing and the other was a writing utensil. These signified that the writer in us is connected to the writing of others. It was intriguing that Natasha brought in an object that

displayed other peoples' writing rather than her own. I was curious if she had written anything lately, other than her blog, that was promoting social justice.

I recorded some notes from Nathasha's scrapbook while the teachers were working on their writing:

- "One day all children in the nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education."

- "It has been inspiring to know that you teach in RSD. You are always positive and pushing for your students' success. Thank you for fulfilling many of the dreams of your students."

- "The best teacher in the world and the universe-John."

- "Ms. S. I'm sorry that I yelled at you. I now and accept the fact that you care about my education. It will never happen again. Again, I'm very sorry."

- "My day is not good because Ms. S is my favorite teacher and she's mean too."

- "I miss you Miss S. I hope you bring us back something. When you come back, I'm going to give you a big hug. I don't like being with John. He takes my pencils. I pushed him and I got a detention The teacher is so mean, she takes my pencil and gives it to John. I am going to be happy when you come back."

- "If I never met Ms. S. I will be very bad and not doing my work. I would not listen to the teacher. Get in a lot of fights. If it was not for Ms S. I would not believe in myself."

After writing for 40 minutes, Charlie asked if we would share our pieces. I told her to bring copies for next time so we could give feedback to one another. I then asked the teachers to revisit their objects and explain how their objects for teaching and writing differed. What did each say about their perceptions of themselves as teachers and writers? Teachers wrote in their journals for five minutes about this, and then we shared our responses.

During the last 10 minutes of our session, I asked teachers to journal on the following:

- Revisit your objects, how does the object you brought in for teaching differ from that of writing?

- How are they similar?

- What do these artifacts say about your perceptions of yourself as a teacher?

- What do these artifacts say about your perceptions of yourself as a writer?

Katelyn shared her response first, noting the drastic difference between the two objects:

> I pretty much know who I am as a teacher but I'm pretty lost as to who I am as a writer. I'd like to think that I'm fairly seasoned at [writing] but I don't know where it's going to take me or what it will do for me in the long run. Someday, I'll figure it out sometime in the future.

Natasha explained,

As a teacher I'm really passionate about what I do and when I write I'm passionate about something. Since I brought the same artifact to represent myself as a teacher and as a writer, I would say that these identities are cohesive for me. My goal in both is to create social change-make an impact. This doesn't mean that I necessarily have to write about only teaching. However, whenever I write, it is usually about something I want to change or inform people about. I have never been much for creative writing. [Writing] usually comes from a place of anger or being riled up and passionate about something.

Charlie said,

As a kid writing those projects or as a teacher, I'm really determined. If I'm going to do it, I want it done well. And so I hold the high expectations with the party points and I want them to meet the high expectations. [...The same] with me as a kid. I would take all the supplies I needed, I would take every moment didn't matter how long it took me and I wanted it perfect according to me. [It is] the same with [my students], I want it perfect. I want to hold [my students] accountable and I want them to achieve a lot.

Charlie only had memories associated with her writing through her childhood. She did not mention any writing that she had done as an adult. Perhaps it was her perfectionism that kept her from writing. There is no such thing as a perfect draft of anything; this may be what kept Charlie from writing about adult experiences.

Session 5: Uncovering our identities and integrity.

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The goal of session 5 was for participants to define and discuss the concepts of identity and integrity regarding teaching and writing. Secondly, participants read their manuscripts aloud in order to obtain feedback from one another and polish their writing.

I asked the group to read and discuss pp. 9-13 in Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach.* "What do you think about this except? (10 minutes). Does it relate at all to your experiences as a teacher? A writer?" Katelyn explained that she had read the book her freshman year in college.

She said that it is the bond that students have with their kids that really matters, "I can have every strategy in the book but unless I have that connection with my kids, I'm not going to have their attention whatsoever." She explained that last year she had a student who misbehaved for older teachers but connected with Katelyn, because Katelyn was younger and understood her. So Katelyn believed that it was the relationship that teachers had with their students that made learning possible.

Natasha jumped in, "I agree. I try to be really real with kids. That's just how it is. Sometimes there's teachers that just don't get their students and their students just don't get them because they aren't real with kids."

Katelyn shared that she had her students write a letter using text writing, and that allowed for her to connect with her classes. "I don't think that older teachers would make that connection that kids love to abbreviate text. I don't know, it's strange."

Charlie explained that she had attended a mini reading conference with her colleagues for ELL strategies. She explained that Palmer's excerpt talked about

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teaching who we really are, but at the conference she attended, the opposite message was communicated:

> How are you going to get them to pass the test? Some of the strategies are cute ideas but there's really a mixed signal out there....We come out of graduate school and it's "teach from your heart; do what you think is right. Teach them skills that they're really going to use." Then you get into the true position and the true world and it's like "skill and drill; make sure they memorize this."

For Charlie, there were two teaching identities, one who was real and supported in a teacher's training and another that was concocted within the school system to support standardized testing environments.

Natasha agreed with this statement:

> Coming out of TFA [Teach for America] you were a robot teacher basically. They told us never smile, don't show anything about yourself, never reveal who you truly are because you're giving them [the students] all the power and I'm sitting there listening to them. And I like have four siblings and have been around children all of my life and that just seemed really odd to me. As I went through Teach for America I thought if I had a teacher who taught this way I would feel so uncomfortable; I would just feel scared. I was in TFA for two years and I had people evaluating me. I had to teach the way they would tell us how to teach. The article is more like how I feel that you have to have this relationship with your kids so I had to transition out of that. I wasn't going to be a robot teacher.

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One of the most well known, established teaching programs, that encourages teachers to work with multi-ethnic students in urban settings was encouraging teachers to detach themselves from their students and their content. The programs that are supposed to teach teachers and the school environments in which they work was discouraging teachers from establishing an authentic teaching identity in their classrooms.

Next, I asked the group, "What does integrity mean to you as a teacher? What does that mean to you in the context of writing? Are those the same things or different?" Charlie spoke up after a pregnant pause:

> I try to be true to myself and do things the way I enjoy doing. I'm going to read a script, like our intervention program is scripted. But that's not really being true to myself cause that's not how I teach reading. But that's what we have to do...

Katelyn explained that teachers do not have the freedom to teach how they wish so it is difficult to be sincere in their classrooms:

> If you teach something that you don't like that you know your kids aren't going to like you have to pretend, "Oh hey, this is fun!" And it's really hard to be sincere. It's like where did my integrity go? I don't want to do this and my kids don't want to do this but we *have* to do this.

Natasha chimed in,

> I was thinking of this differently as a middle school teacher. I have kids ask, "What would you do in this situation Ms. S. Have you ever had a fight with somebody" or things like that, and I've developed this persona...you develop

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ways that you want [students] to view you. I think it's really important to

show the kids integrity, to display that and model that. And sometimes

teachers don't do that...[laughter].

The teachers had constructed false identities to appease society as well, appearing congenial and *put-together* at all times.

I asked the teachers if this persona was true to themselves.

Katelyn answered, "I'm Katelyn and I'm Ms. S. [Both] are me but they're two completely different people. I'm very strict....you can't let that kid get away with that in class. Ms. S. is this more proper version of myself."

Natasha revealed that when she made a parent phone call a student had told his mother that she was not married and that she devoted her life to the class, that she lived only for teaching and had no personal life. So Natasha displayed one identity, the teacher who went home and constantly graded papers. Her identity away from school was that she had a long term boyfriend, liked to travel, met with friends, and enjoyed a lazy Sunday blogging on her couch.

I steered the teachers toward discussing their writing identities. Again, there was a long pause.

Natasha, the most confident writer in the group explained, "I'm not going to write anything that I don't believe in."

Katelyn said that it depends on the purpose of the writing:

If I'm writing something pretty serious and dear to my heart then I'll be

pretty sincere about it, but if I'm just writing something goofy or fun, I'll still

be serious about it but...I think it's still important to be true to you are in

your writing.

Charlie stated,

When someone says "show my full...thoughts" I usually don't show people. I

think I'm a really shy writer. I'll share most anything but when I put it in

writing, maybe because I'm being more descriptive or being more

detailed...Although with my personality I'll share most anything.

Charlie revealed that she erased most of her manuscript because it was *stupid*

and printed one page of different brainstorms for us to give feedback on.

I steered Charlie back to her statement about always being sincere as a writer:

"Does that mean that you are sometimes insincere as a teacher? Is there a different

identity [that you display]?" She said that she was mandated to teach a prescribed

curriculum so when she teaches her lessons she premises them with, "I love you

[students] but I don't love what I'm teaching." So Charlie had to separate herself

from her curriculum vocally and psychologically to retain who she was as a teacher.

Teachers shared their pieces aloud in a counter-clockwise rotation. Charlie read

her manuscript first. She explained,

As a child I loved being given the time to write. Whether asked to write a

story for science or journal about our life, it came easy and was done with

pleasure. I can still remember my mom asking, "Are you almost done?" or

ask if I needed some help. The fact is that I did not want to be done.

Again, Charlie discussed her writing identity from a childhood persona. This

was the only way in which she discussed her writing positively.

In another disconnected paragraph, Charlie shared her dismay at having students write nightly reading logs and not practice their writing in a log. "Is writing not important? We already know that reading and writing go hand in hand. A good reader often has a passion for writing as well."

The other participants gave feedback to Charlie. Katelyn too loved free-writes as a student, "...I couldn't get my pencil to stop," but had the same problem with students not having ideas to write about, "You have to prompt the kids; when can kids start prompting themselves?"

Natasha liked how Charlie talked about herself as a child in her piece. Katelyn wanted to know what Charlie's goals were with her writing.

Charlie explained,

I don't know if I want to get published or anything. I just want to write right now. Maybe right now I could choose my topic. Which topic am I must passionate about? Cause every week I've been writing about something different.

I gave advice to Charlie on tying her pieces together:

Maybe you could do a writing montage. A common theme in here is writing and ELD students so maybe you could title it like a collage of ELD writing. Even date it like a journal...as an ELD teacher I'm constantly pulled here and there, and so is my writing, and here's snippets of what's going through my head...

Charlie acknowledged, "As I write, my mind goes everywhere." I'll just indent a few spaces and then it's like ok, next topic."

I suggested that someone in the group could write about why reading and writing are often taught as two separate entities in language arts classes. I said that in my high school classroom I teach these as part of the same process in that reading is the act of receiving written text and writing is a gift of text that we bestow upon others. "In professional development for teachers [the professional development specialists] say "now you're going to do reading, now you're going to do writing." It's like they're the same darned thing...it's so weird how it's taught..." Charlie agreed with my sentiments.

Katelyn shared her piece next. As she handed out her piece we erupted into laughter, glancing down at the pages. Her manuscript began as a list of chapter ideas including, The Power of Personal Trauma, Administration, Ridiculous Students, and Teachers who Drink too Much. The opening paragraph read,

> Be prepared; this is not for those college student teachers who dream of saving children from futures of illiteracy. This is not for those first year teachers who still believe that if they can reach one child, their work is valued. No, no. This is for any and all middle school teachers who have served their time, put in their dues. Painstakingly graded papers, made parent phone calls home, came in early, forfeited lunch, stayed late, and received what in return, exactly? A big, fat steaming pile of failure! Yes, this is for the teachers who are so bitter and only stay, because, well, where else can you observe and be a part of this much insanity and get paid for it?

The piece was comically written to share Katelyn's frustrations with her teaching position.

Katelyn's outline for chapter 2 included descriptions of some disturbing stories about her colleagues, including a teacher who had drove into a fence drunk, was arrested and spent a night in jail, and then went into work in time to teach on Monday morning.

In chapter 3, Katelyn described her principal whom she named *Skeletor*, for her anorexic frame. She described how this administrator always looked physically and emotionally exhausted. This principal read school announcements with a "Word of the Week" renamed by Katelyn and her colleagues as the "Word on the Street" because of the many mispronunciations and incorrect definitions that *Skeletor* used on the PA system. Katelyn explained, "The nonsense words that have come from [Skeletor's] mouth would make Kurt Cobain's lyrics seem...misunderstood and normal."

As Katelyn shared her stories, Charlie and Natasha laughed and related to the *craziness* of teaching. The manuscript turned our writing group into a stand-up comedy session in which Katelyn performed her chapters, and the rest of us laughed. The situations were disturbing yet ridiculous.

Charlie explained that the writing was *really good*. She did not specify what was good about the writing. Perhaps this is because of her lack of confidence as a writer.

After Katelyn shared her writing, she explained that stories that she had written with her teaching colleagues helped them get through the school day. Katelyn had discussed writing a book last year with these teachers but they had not found the time to write it. I suggested that Katelyn could work on her book for the National

Council for Teachers of English Conference. If she had a book idea, publishers would be at the conference, and often, solicit book contracts at that venue. Katelyn asked, "Who would publish this though? It really does not paint school in a positive light."

I explained that it might not matter. If the book would sell, it was feasible that it could be published. I also suggested that Katelyn's stories could be turned into a comic book. The group liked this idea. I stated that Katelyn could do the writing and a person on her teaching team could draw the illustrations. That *Skeletor* might make the perfect villain in her "Castle Administration-skull." After our laughter, I suggested that Katelyn might want to write up the comic strips and Charlie could do the illustrations since she enjoyed drawing.

For the first time in our sessions, Charlie sounded confident about her writing and said that she liked the idea. We discussed that a humor blog could also be initiated which solicited humorous teaching stories from educators across the country. Katelyn described a college student who turned his blog of humorous college stories into a published book. For the first time, like Charlie, Katelyn displayed confidence in her writing, "I could do that; I could do even better." This suggests that if teachers are given the time and freedom to write about topics of their selection they begin to write with confidence and see themselves as writers.

Charlie suggested a chapter that focused on administrators because all teachers could relate to it. She explained that Katelyn's piece was "really well polished." Charlie explained, "I would limit your chapters down to more common themes. Maybe you could chunk them more together." This was the first time that Charlie

gave specific, critical feedback to the group. It was clear Charlie was feeling less intimidated when discussing writing.

Natasha was the last to read her writing. She wrote an essay that described the sadness she had, during her first year of teaching, when she discovered that her students had been neglected by their former teacher, and taught in a partitioned section of a room without books or furniture. Paint had peeled off of the walls and there was no carpeting. There was a pile of IEP's, which contained confidential information on the floor.

Natasha wrote,

> The point of the above description is not to harvest pity for myself, the poor teacher who had to clean up this ridiculous mess. The real problem I had with all of this was that this is how the classroom had been kept the entire previous school year. The special education students had been sent to a room without desks or any materials with which to learn. They were sent to this place where nobody could see or hear them, and nobody cared what happened to them.

Rather than using humor to contend with difficult situations, as Katelyn had, Natasha tapped into her social activist identity immediately, and wrote an angry, heartfelt piece about saving her students from a broken school system.

Natasha shared a second vignette in which she wrote about a student named Kevin, who was in her classroom during her first year of teaching. Her colleagues described him as "the student that no teacher could handle." He was known for "flying into a rage," singing and dancing in class while teacher tried to instruct their

students. During Natasha's first day of teaching Kevin, he let out a roar and threw a desk across the room:

> Kevin stood with his fists clenched, tears streaming down his face. It seemed that the other students were used to this sort of behavior. No one in the room appeared shocked or afraid. Ten expectant faces turned to find what my reaction would be.

After throwing his desk, Kevin told Natasha, "I don't know how to read." Natasha read each of the questions that Kevin was expected to complete aloud, and helped spell his answers. She was the first teacher who had formed a close relationship with Kevin; she saw him as a person rather than a problem:

> His favorite color was blue. He liked Chris Brown and rap music. He loved football. He had at least ten siblings, the names of whom he rattled off faster than I could write them. He wanted to be a lawyer.

Natasha explained that Kevin's mother was a drug addict who was in jail and that his father was a former gang member, who had fathered many children with many different women in the neighborhood. He had been severely abused and neglected as a toddler. His grandmother was raising him:

> Kevin was the most challenging student I have ever worked with. He was also the student who was the most disenfranchised by the educational system. Within a few weeks of the school year starting I had become known as the teacher who had "tamed Kevin." I know that I taught Kevin a great deal that year, both academically and behaviorally, but in reality, it was my life that was changed by this relationship.

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Natasha explained,

> It became my personal goal to help students who were categorized as
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> behavior problems at the school. I could see that much of the time the
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> student's issues stemmed from being bored, trying to avoid work so as not to
>
> lose face from their peers, and low expectations from previous teachers.
>
> Year after year I worked with [these] students.

In her third vignette, Natasha described another student who was disruptive, named Noll. After calling his home, and speaking to his mother on a nightly basis, reporting both positive and negative behaviors that Noll displayed in class. She wrote,

> Noll bragged about what an awesome teacher I was, telling everyone that I
>
> was not married, nor did I have children because I was devoting my time to
>
> my students.... He explained that I couldn't get enough of my students.

Natasha laughed while reading this section, amused that her students pictured her as the lonely school teacher, who clung to her students for meaning. Natasha explained that she hid her personal life from her students, including dating and personal relationships. The participants all explained that they had two different identities, one that was more serious and stern in the classroom and the other that encompassed their personal relationships.

Katelyn said, "Your story reminds me of the resource teachers at our school. We really don't give them enough credit. We don't realize that your job is really hard... [writing] sheds a whole new light on special education." Katelyn said that special education students were also neglected at her school. Teachers handed them

worksheets to complete as rote, menial tasks. The themes that Katelyn had shared a few minutes earlier in her piece about *stupid student questions* and *ridiculous students* dissipated as she continued to empathize with Natasha.

Teachers' writing served as a connective tool within our community that allowed for us to share stories with each other. This writing tapped into other aspects of the teachers' identities. For example, when Katelyn had shared her humorous stories, Natasha laughed along with the group comfortably and momentarily suspended her social activist identity. This highlights the power behind teachers sharing their stories as sources of inspiration and encouragement to become empowered about the obstacles they encounter in the educational profession.

Natasha felt powerful when she helped disruptive students like Kevin. She differed from Charlie who felt that difficult students needed to be subdued in their behaviors, "If I can deal with one of those students then bring it on!"

Charlie connected to Natasha's piece, "You knew so much about [Kevin] I know that I have students that I wish I knew the background about...."

I suggested that Natasha focus her writing on Kevin's story because of its vividness and power. I tossed out the title, "Saving Kevin" and suggested that she write a personal memoir about her journey in working with this trying student. Charlie chimed in, "Talk about how [Kevin] helped you." I explained that I was not trying to pressure the group about what to write, but that I wanted to provide them with topics:

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I see us going to NCTE [The National Council for Teachers of English

Conference]. I see myself presenting my dissertation about what I find out

about you guys. I see [Katelyn] doing a comical piece. Maybe [Charlie]

wants to illustrate for this, and I see [Natasha] doing a piece on herself and

Kevin. We can room together and have a blast doing it. Put yourself out

there.

Katelyn and Natasha thought that this was exciting. Charlie felt hesitant and wanted to write something more polished later. She felt that her ideas were too scattered but that illustrating Katelyn's comic book would be fun.

I explained, "You have never been at a conference like this, but it's very cool to read your stuff and have others interested in your stuff!" I stated when proposals were due and suggested that I help them write proposals for NCTE. We agreed to spend the next session revising our manuscripts.

During this session, Charlie and Katelyn wrote with confidence for the first time. As they shared their writing, and connected with each others' stories, their ideas built upon one another. They joined ideas and began discovering that they could negotiate writing and teaching simultaneously. Unlike Charlie and Katelyn, Natasha remained static in her identity as a writer/teacher advocate and remained compelled to share her stories.

Session 6: Reconnecting the self.

The goal of session 6 was for participants to explore their self perceptions in their journals using Parker Palmer's (1998) *The Courage to Teach* as a springboard

for their writing. For most of the session, participants wrote their manuscripts and then shared them briefly with the community.

Before the session formally began, the participants discussed issues that angered them about their schools. Charlie wanted to leave her elementary campus and transfer to a middle school to see if it was less stressful. She spent three days of her fall break planning for her next unit to get ahead, only to be told by administrators upon her return, that she was teaching a reading program called Reads 180. She worried that administrators would come into her classroom and think that she was not prepared enough because of this quick change in her preparation.

Charlie asked Katelyn if she thought that middle school was less stressful. Katelyn munched on some chips, dipping them generously into the spinach dip and salsa. She thought that her job was equally stressful because she was always pressed for time. Katelyn explained,

> This is the first thing that I have eaten since 11:30. I just ate a bowl of cereal. I don't like to eat a lot at school because then I have to go to the bathroom and I don't have time to.

Schools emphasize that students should eat well-balanced meals so they can do well in their classes, but what about teachers? How are they supposed to remain productive and initiate excellent lessons if they are undernourished and need to use the restroom?

I asked the teachers to read pp. 9-13 in Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach:* "Read the section. Feel free to highlight anything that is important to you. Then, write anything that comes to mind after reading the excerpt." I abandoned my

initial idea of having us journal about connectedness in the classroom because I wanted the teachers to have time to work on their writing. In this section, Palmer explains the main premise of his book, "Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher" (p. 10). Palmer writes about the *true self* in teaching. He explains that teachers cannot have a strong identity unless they tap into their personal lives, and interweave them with the professional:

> As good teachers weave the fabric that joins them with students and subjects, the heart is the loom on which the threads are tied, the tension is held, the shuttle flies, and the fabric is stretched tight…teaching tugs at the heart, opens the heart, even breaks the hearts—and the more one loves teaching, the more heartbreaking it can be. (p.11)

Natasha came in 12 minutes late; I handed her a copy of the reading.

For the first time, I noticed that our seating corresponded with our confidence as writers. For example, Charlie and Katelyn shared a couch; they both did not identify themselves as writers, and often piggy-backed on each other's comments about this in our sessions. Natasha sat on her own couch, and I sat in a single seat, that was large and expansive. It was as if Natasha and I sat alone because we each felt confident writing about separate ideas, while Charlie and Katelyn were still contemplating whether they should write a comic book together.

I asked the girls to share their writing, connected to the excerpt, 30 minutes into the session.

Natasha was the first to finish writing and volunteered to share her entry. In her journal, Natasha wrote about the line, "The more teachers love to teach the more heartbreaking it can be." She wrote, "Things really get to me, especially when I see adults mistreat kids."

Natasha appreciated the autonomy that she had at her school:

A couple of things struck me, first the idea that the more one loves to teach, the more heartbreaking it can be. I take my job very personally, and I get very worked up about things, especially when I see the kids being mistreated by adults. I have been told by veteran teachers that I need to have "thicker skin." If I stop really allowing things to get to me, I would also stop being inspired to make change.

Natasha also related to the good and bad days that Palmer references:

Some days I feel like a great teacher, and on other days, I feel like the worst teacher ever! On those bad days it seems like I will never be a really good teacher, and I am just playing the role of teacher without every really teaching anyone.

Natasha discussed the notion of *playing teacher,* something that she articulated in our last session when she discussed the different identities that teachers use. In her journal, Natasha wrote about the importance of the *personal* identity in the classroom:

[The personal] is a big part of my classroom community. I have a great degree of freedom in my classroom in that nobody ever asks me what or how I am teaching reading or writing. A part of me is afraid to go teach at a

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better school because I fear losing that autonomy and along with it, the personal touch of my classroom. Like we talked about last time, I don't think that I can teach without a sense of integrity regarding what I am teaching and how I teach it. I personally design each of my lessons to the needs of my students using subject matter that I think will motivate and interest them. Like the author, I sometimes (or often) question whether this is the right field for me, or whether I should find a different career…one that doesn't drain the life out of me.

Natasha taught at her poorly funded school, in part, because she was afraid that she would lose her freedom to teach to her integrity at wealthier schools. She knew who she was as an educator and did not want to lose this. In her journal, she was able to vent these frustrations.

Katelyn shared her piece next. She commented on "the three tiers of the teacher." Katelyn said,

This is talking about the teacher but where is the responsibility coming from the student? Why does it always come down to the teacher? Where is the intellect from the students, emotional and spiritual guidance from the students? We're supposed to figure out who we are when students need to also figure this out. It's hard to teach students who don't want to learn.... Maybe I'm just venting my frustrations but where's the accountability for the students?

In her journal Katelyn elaborated:

After reading Palmer I really did begin to think about the who that teaches. Even now, I struggle with that thought. Who is the self that teaches? There is not a simple answer to that question…Intellectual, emotional, spiritual…I do agree that all of these qualities are needed—none more important than the other. But now, here's my thoughts—why is it always coming down to the teacher? Why is the main focus never the actual learning from the learners? Palmer does touch on this, but I do believe that students are who they are—no manner of great teaching will reach a child who does not want to learn. No manner of poor teaching will deter a good student who strives to learn.

Katelyn felt that teachers made small changes with their students students. So Katelyn did not believe that her role in teaching was nearly as important to students' success, whereas, Natasha perceived her lessons to be the element that kept her students in school. Katelyn digressed into questions about student accountability, family values, and parenting skills.

She wrote,

To be my own devil's advocate, sure there are the students who will work hard for a teacher purely based on emotions connected to that teacher. More often than not, though, that is just a reluctant learner—refusing to take charge of his/her academics because there is no solid value on education at home." Katelyn ended her writing with three questions: "Are [students] smart enough? [Do students] care enough? [Are students] connected enough?"

Katelyn avoided talking about her identity. She focused on her students instead, perhaps so that she did not have to contend with her perceptions of herself. Katelyn was also venting her frustrations because she felt that she had 100% of the burden placed on her shoulders as the classroom teacher and that her students shared none of the responsibility to learn. However, she felt cornered because she believed that she could not make a change in her students' education. What does this do to one's teaching identity? How might Katelyn feel empowered to once again be able to make changes in her students? Katelyn's continued use of dashes in her journal entry may have indicated that she was in a hurry to get her thoughts down on the page or that she felt frantic while recording her thoughts.

Charlie wrote about *teacher bashing* and summarized this piece for the group. She explained, "I even bash myself because [I] put so much pressure on [my]self."

In her journal she wrote,

> So much of the public continues to bash teachers and blame them for the negative results the school is producing. The sad part is it is not only teachers who are being bashed, but the teachers are doing the bashing as well. There is so much negativity surrounding the education[al] system. If you can't beat them, join them as they say. I have become a member of the complaining group at my school. The expectations are so high that we all are so stressed and almost turning against each other. Teachers talk badly of one another only because they feel the pressure that maybe the other person is working harder or the other person is getting better results.

Charlie articulated that teachers were confrontational, trying to out-do one another in their lessons. This tense atmosphere and her administrator's emphasis on test scores made Charlie emotionally drained and physically exhausted.

Charlie wrote,

> I ask the question, "Why?" a lot in my own instruction. Why am I teaching this? I wonder if I'm only wasting [my students] and my time while teaching some of the mandated standards. Will this really benefit [students'] lives in the future?

Like Natasha, Charlie feared losing her sense of purpose and connectedness to herself as an educator, because she had to teach lessons that were fabricated, and disconnected from her students. She did not want to lose herself in the classroom; her integrity, the very reason she began teaching in the first place. But after implementing lessons that had little to do with what she knew was right for kids, she would, inevitably, lose part of herself. Can the self be reconnected once it is lost?

Lastly, Charlie quoted Parker Palmer's line, "Technique is what teachers use until the real teacher arrives." The phrase reminded her of her mentor teacher:

> When I was teaching with [my mentor] she didn't use any of the techniques that our district has now mandated us that they want to see these things going on in our classrooms. But she came in 15 minutes before the bell rang, she left 30 minutes after the bell rang and she's still a [passionate] teacher after 25 years...She never did any of those methods. And now for me in my

lesson plans I have to say "I'm doing this..." It's like we're running from one

thing to the next and that's how we're getting burnt out.

When districts and administrators dictate that educators teach in ways that are

inauthentic to their ideas about teaching and learning they become tired, frustrated,

and often, leave the profession. Charlie saw her mentor as a miracle worker who did

well in spite of her school district's constraints. This teacher ignored other peoples'

ideas of what they thought teaching should be and tapped into her own creative

resources, connected to her self, to remain true to her identity. "[My mentor] has

lasted this long and I don't know if I can last that long at the rate...."

I re-read part of Palmer's writing that spoke about *the heart of the loom.* "Good

teachers weave the fabric that joins them with students. The heart is the loom on

which the threads are tied..." (p. 11).

Teachers were exploring their perceptions of themselves as educators, as well as

good teaching, and learning in their journals. Charlie feared that she had lost her

effective teaching techniques and was becoming a clone of pre-fabricated

worksheets and graphic organizers. Natasha feared that if she left her impoverished

school, where nobody cared about the students, that she would face the same fate.

Katelyn had just given up; she felt no connection between her methods and student

learning.

While the group worked on their manuscripts, I read and took field notes on

their journals. After working on their pieces for one hour, the participants shared

their writing. Natasha continued to write about Kevin and another difficult student

at her school. She ended that evening by writing:

There were days when Noll and other students brought me to my wits end. I wondered whether I was really making an impact or whether I could change things in the long run for their futures. The changes never happened overnight. Sometimes it seemed like students took a step forward only to take three steps back.

She continued to write,

I realized that this was part of working with teenagers in general. Many people do not realize that during the teenage years, certain parts of the brain that control decision making are not fully formed. Teenagers often do weird things and make poor choices because they are not capable of thinking in the same way as an adult. I could not expect my students to operate the same way I would in certain situations, not only because their backgrounds were different from mine, but because their brains were not finished growing and developing. I had to create the structures in which my students could flourish as individuals and teach them specifically how to make good choices. I had to do this within a space where they were treated as adults so that their confidence grew exponentially.

Natasha believed that she could make a difference in her students' lives, and continued to fight for their needs.

Katelyn wrote about her principal and assistant principal. She and her colleagues were curious about what her assistant principal had done for a profession before he had arrived at their school. Katelyn explained that the assistant principal went from being a detention officer to her administrator:

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His dad was a big shot at a university so he weaseled his way into hierarchy because of family…He had it made but he was addicted to pain killers. He went crazy, went to rehab, relapsed and was never heard from again that year. Now he is the computer tech at one of our elementary schools.

Katelyn sarcastically wrote,

We wish there was an eloquent, intellectually wordy way to segue into the next (former) administrator, but come on over, Tom Cruise. This mission is impossible! Henry was the worst assistant principal in the history of assistant principals. Even the word principal should never be said in the same sentence with that name, unless of course it is meant like what was previously stated. WORST EVER. To be fair, however, he was really well practiced at the art of being a horrendous administrator. Like, stealthily good at sucking at his job. Rumor has it, yet again, that this administrator never really spent any true, quality teaching time in a classroom. Word was that he possibly was a kindergarten teacher, but there are absolutely no facts to back that claim; this is purely hearsay. For how long, when, and where still remains a mystery to this day.

She continued:

After this, he was the lucky recipient of being a glorified babysitter. He was a detention teacher. Basically, you sit in a room all day with the bad kids that have been written up for some type of transgression, keep them quiet, and if you have time, try to make them do their work from their classes. What a gem of a job, right? Was he actually teaching? No. Was there any

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real responsibility? No. Hey, why not give him a promotion! Bam! A year or

so of this position, he becomes assistant principal.

Charlie shared her writing last with the group. "I tried to be positive but I am just really feeling negative about my job right now."

She brainstormed how problems in the school system might be fixed but also believed that the circumstances were bleak. She wrote about her frustrations from that particular school day:

Prior to this day even beginning, I felt like I was having an anxiety attack on Monday; this occurs rarely, maybe even rarely for me. It was the day after break and I didn't feel prepared. The idea of anyone out of the frequent school observers coming into my classroom got me into a funk. They say it is only to give feedback or helpful suggestions. Do they understand how uneasy that makes most teachers? Flying into the classroom with a notepad with requirements to check makes it known that they don't truly trust us. I wonder if they think they can fulfill our shoes more successfully? Yes, they were once teachers in their own classroom[s]. They got out of it. Why? Could they not take the heat and began thinking of other careers in education just like myself?

During the session, teachers vented their frustrations about their colleagues, administrators, and students. Katelyn and Natasha both felt very differently about their teaching. While Katelyn believed that students would learn regardless of their teacher, Natasha believed in her power as an educator, and felt compelled to continuously save her special education students from a corrupt educational system.

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The participants were writing to explore other career options because of their school environments, which they believed had stripped their educational freedom.

We decided on meeting times for the month of November and left for the evening.

Session 7: Exploring our classrooms and our writing.

The goal of session 7 was for participants to reflect on their classrooms and think about how their classrooms fit into the rest of their school communities. Lastly, participants wrote and shared their manuscripts with one another.

I discovered that I did not know much about the participants' classrooms. To contextualize their stories I needed a clear picture of where they taught. I asked the teachers to describe their classrooms in their journals, and explain how their classrooms fit into the context of their schools. I also asked if I might visit each of their classrooms sometime, during a school day, during the following semester. The participants were fine with this visit.

After 20 minutes of writing, I asked the teachers if they wanted to share their classroom descriptions. Katelyn volunteered immediately, "I totally will; I have a story to tell." She summarized her writing for the group. The following description is a summary of Katelyn's journal entry that she shared with the group:

> ...my classroom used to be part of a two-room art room. My room was now part of the clay room. Yeah, it housed a kiln, horrible, steel drying cabinets, and God awful tables with layers upon layers of paint resin and clay dust. I actually cried last year when they told me that was the room I was moving

to. Actually, I was never really told that was the room I was moving to. [My assignment] was put up on a document camera like, "Here's your new room." Honestly, I walked in there and I cried. I was like, why would they do this? Then I was told "don't worry, it's going to be redone..." they were supposed to of course paint, remove the kiln, the cabinets...give me a new floor, all that good stuff.

I come back a week before school starts, the only thing that was done was the kiln was removed, that's it.... So I find any custodian, any person to listen to me basically "bitch"' my way into getting something to happen.... I got really mad at the head custodian...So for the next three days they're in there working, I'm in there working trying to get stuff done. Finally, I get new ceiling tiles. They didn't even redo the floor, they just polished the floor...they tried to scrub and get everything, all the clay dust cleared out...So with two days before school started I'm at square one. I had an empty room. So for the next two days I'm trying to get word walls up, posters up, and like actually make it into a classroom. So I'm happy to say my room looks typical and that's a feat...I've been [at my school] for four years and I've had three different classrooms....

When I asked Katelyn if her classroom fit into the context of her school she explained that she made it more interactive; her students posted words on a word wall as well as a *Great Wall of Word Choice* that displayed different vocabulary that they could use in their writing. Because she taught in the Avid program, Katelyn had a *Campus Corner* on display, with posters displaying respected

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colleges including where she had attended college. Like Natasha, Katelyn fought to construct a classroom that would be appropriate for students' learning. She explained that she had to move from a nice classroom, housed in a new wing of the school, to the art room, because she switched preparations from eighth to sixth grade.

Next, Natasha shared her classroom with the group. She said a colleague had lost her job and that she received her classroom, the best classroom at her school, because of this termination. She wrote about her frustrations about the rooms on her campus:

> I feel like a lot of the classrooms I walk into students are expected to be quiet and do their work. The kids have a greater degree of autonomy [in my classroom]. As long as they are fulfilling my expectations the kids can sit where they want; so my classroom is a little bit different. It is a lot less restrictive than other classrooms.

In her journal Natasha described inspirational quotes that adorned her walls: "You can do whatever you set your mind to. Seize the day! Work hard. Be nice., and No excuses." She had also posted personal photographs of her cats and family, and student work was posted on bulletin boards. Natasha also used personal belongings to inspire her students to work hard, "I have a pair of my jeans hanging on the wall that the kids sign whenever they score an 80 or higher on a quiz or test (The Smarty Pants)." Natasha wore these pants on Fridays to display the students' names. "I try to make [the room] theirs as much as possible. I do not walk into other rooms and find pictures of the students on the walls."

Natasha continued,

> Everything in the room is available for [students'] own use unless it is
> behind my own desk. They can use whatever they need to get their work
> done, and they don't need to ask for permission. The kids have a greater
> degree of autonomy in my classroom than elsewhere at the school because,
> once we have established the procedures and expectations, I trust that they
> will do what they have to in order to get what they need to accomplish [their
> work].

Natasha afforded her students a great deal of freedom, particularly since they
had not had success in other teachers' classrooms which were more restrictive:

> Students have told me that they feel really comfortable in my classroom and
> are "afraid to break something" in others. I get that vibe myself in other
> rooms! The room itself conveys what kind of order, stability, and
> personality the teachers has a lot of the time.

Natasha's classroom was a sanctuary of acceptance; a place where her special
education students could be creative and feel successful unlike their other teachers'
classrooms which she saw as hostile, negative places that stifled creativity.

Natasha explained that recently, her students were cleaning her classroom, and a
student slammed a book on her desk. As a result, he shattered the glass top that sat
on top of it. She said that while other teachers at her school would have yelled at the
student and sent him to the office for a detention, she treated this as an accident and
remained calm as she helped the student clean up the shards of glass. This incident
was indicative of Natasha's comfort level with her students. For Natasha, her

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classroom was a place of acceptance where students did not need to be afraid of making a mistake in their learning, or their behavior as long as they followed the safety norms that she and her students wrote.

Charlie was the last to share her journal entry. She described her room as really bright colorful, loud, and serious when it came to students completing their work. Charlie wrote:

> Students sit in groups of four-five. There is a reading corner with four bookshelves full of literature. Four comfy chairs sit in the middle of the reading corner. All of my cabinets are used for a word wall…. Student work is displayed only in bulletin boards. The student of the week also has their own personal bulletin board…My goal is to make my classroom as comfortable, interactive, and as academically productive as possible. For example, I make posters of all the things we learn in grammar and strategies we learn in writing. Our school is very bland…although there are brightly colored walls, they are blank…. Our new school committee has assigned each teacher to create a theme and make a poster about that theme for example, appropriate behavior or working hard. Some teachers are excited to decorate the halls with these student made posters, while others are unhappy to add it to their ongoing list.

Charlie's administrators mandated that art be placed on the wall. This paralleled their dictatorial tone which Charlie had described in previous writing group sessions.

Charlie explained,

I got the *Neatest Classroom Award.* I zone in on the mess right away. I am

right in the middle between other teachers who spend money on pre-made

posters. I use all student work or posters I made on the lesson. Some

teachers have blank walls; I am right in the middle. As a school we are

trying to create a more welcoming environment so teachers are adding

posters to the school.

Katelyn was interested in these posters and asked Charlie about them. This led

to a story that I shared about my school three years ago when my students' posters

in the hallway were set on fire as part of a student prank. Classes were forced to

evacuate the building and go to the football field for the remainder of the class hour.

Charlie was insistent that her room remained neat and tidy. She believed that a

neat classroom led to more efficient, well behaved students. Charlie made the

decisions about where items were placed in her classroom and told her students

where they should be displayed. This differed greatly from Natasha's classroom in

which she had a partnership with her students, who often had choice on where they

placed their work in her room.

The teachers continued to discuss their classrooms. Katelyn explained, "We are

required to have high quality [student] work. My principal said "change your

student high quality work." Teachers were required to change student work

frequently.

Charlie explained, "One thing I hate is that there is no art class in my classroom

because it is an ELD class. I think that is really disgusting. [Art] promotes creativity

your brain works in a different way."

Natasha chimed in, "There is no art at my school. There is no student work; it's just brick walls.

During the last five minutes of the session, teachers shared their manuscripts. Charlie wrote about a student who left for Mexico, which made her sad. She asked "What happens to [these students]? Where will she be in 10 years?" Katelyn finished her satirical chapter about her principal and vice principal. Natasha continued to write about the negative atmosphere at her school, and the importance of building relationships with her students to counter it.

Since we ran out of time, teachers e-mailed me a response to the following: "What is a writing task that you completed or did not complete that was important to you? How did this experience shape your perceptions of yourself?" In their e-mail correspondence, the participants revealed some interesting ideas. Katelyn explained,

> I have never really written anything except just keeping a journal to vent
> frustrations and such. However, the piece I am working on now in the
> group has become very important to me. I want to share the hilarity of
> teaching and our crazy stories from school. [I would really like to complete
> my stories] (even though I am not sure what direction I am really going
> [with them].) If I do not finish [my book], I know I will keep thinking, why
> not? Why didn't I get going? What if this was hugely successful?

Katelyn wrote a story about teaching during her National Writing Project 2010 summer institute. It was interesting that did not mention this article in her e-mail.

Her manuscript entitled, "What CAWP Means to Me," was published in their summer bulletin. In this piece, she wrote,

> I am extremely fortunate and grateful to [the NWP summer institute] for providing me with the opportunity to surround myself with teachers from all grade levels and varying years of experience. Two years teaching seventh grade language arts with a Bachelor's degree is all [that] I have to offer. Yet here I am with doctoral students, published writers, university professors, coaches and teachers who have been in the field longer than I have been alive, and at times, I wonder how I got here. It is at these times, however, that I find strength in myself as a teacher and a writer. I begin to doubt myself [when] I remember the most important thing. I am here. I was chosen. Someone saw potential in me...I find that even trying to depict this experience would do it injustice. In order to show how thankful I am to have been a part of this community, I have to put what I have learned into practice. I must share my knowledge with fellow teachers at my school and all future students. To give back what [the institute] has given to me is the ultimate goal, and I am more than willing to begin my journey.

Even though the summer institute left a positive impression upon Katelyn, so much so that she dedicated her writing to the experience, she did not think of this manuscript when she was asked about important writing tasks that she had completed. This suggests that educators may not internalize their writing experiences unless they write frequently. Katelyn left the institute feeling unconfident in her writing abilities.

Natasha wrote about her master's thesis:

> Probably the most important writing task I have worked on was my
> undergraduate senior thesis at Providence College. I wrote on gender
> construction in *The House of Mirth*, integrating my work from both my
> English and [w]omen's [s]tudies majors. I wrote my thesis as an independent
> study [student], so I had to plan my research, writing, and advisor meetings
> on my own. This was one of the most rewarding experiences I had in college
> and as a writer. I really enjoyed meeting with my advisor and formulating
> my arguments through discussion, conducting research on a topic that I had
> selected, and doing the actual writing over the course of a semester. My
> thesis was awarded the highest honor for writing at Providence College that
> year. I also had to present my thesis to a group of English majors, friends,
> and family in a symposium forum. The reviews of my thesis were all very
> positive. It gave me a lot of confidence in my writing and my work. I had
> been working on something for an entire semester which only I had seen,
> along with my advisor. When people read it, and actually thought it was a
> legitimately good piece of academic writing, it validated all of the work
> [that] I had done.

Natasha differed from the other participants in that she was not an education
major; she was also the only participant who felt confident about her writing. This
may suggest that teacher education programs need to encourage teachers to write
and share their writing for both personal and professional purposes.

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Charlie's most important piece of writing was, like Natasha, connected to her master's degree. She wrote,

[The three essays that I wrote for my master's degree] made me feel confident as an instructor and as a writer. It was also a time when I felt the most passionate about teaching. I was writing about issues that my students [were] affected by daily. During the writing process, I thought critically about the curriculum I instructed and the delivery of the instruction, and finally how all of that impacted them and their future[s]. Completing the essays made me think I was going to continue in education beyond just the classroom. Although I was thrilled about the pieces, I was excited it was done and that I could get back to spending time with my family and friends.

Charlie also acknowledged a time when she was disappointed with her writing:

The writing task that is most important to me that I have recently failed to continue is daily journaling. Writing about life and my future goals has always been quite therapeutic for me, yet for some reason I do not make myself find the time anymore. Not making the time for this makes me feel not put together and disorganized. It makes me feel like I have become lazy in certain areas in my life and do not have my priorities in line.

Although Charlie missed writing she had not found a way to allot the time to do so with her busy teaching schedule.

Session 8: Exploring the heart.

The goal of session 8 was for the community to explore their emotions about their teaching using Parker Palmer's (1998) *The Courage to Teach* as a springboard

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for their writing and discussion. The rest of the time was dedicated toward

participants writing their manuscripts and summating the objects that participants

would bring next week that conveyed their perceptions of themselves as educators

and as writers.

I asked the teachers to print copies of their work for the next meeting so that we

could read and polish each others' writing.

I told the group that I would share my NCTE 2010 proposal with them at one of

our last sessions so that they would have a model for their own proposals should

they decide to present. The teachers were hesitant about this. Katelyn asked, "What

all entails presenting? Are you in front of a group of huge people?"

I assured the group that there were so many people presenting simultaneously

that most likely, they would have no more than 20 people attend their session

should they present.

Charlie explained, "I just don't even know what I would share." I told the

participants, "You don't have to feel pressured to do anything. [Presenting] is

something that I'll expose you to and if it's something you're interested in, you can

always contact me..."

Next, I asked teachers to write about Palmer and Livsey's (1999, p. 38) *heart*

mantra which includes *teaching from the heart*, *losing heart*, *seeking to take heart*

and giving their hearts to their students. I asked them to explain the phase that they

were in at that moment with their classes. Additional questions that teachers

explored in their journals included, "Are you happy with the phase that you are in?

What does this say about you as a teacher? Does writing play a role in that phase?"

Charlie volunteered to share her writing first. She explained that she wavers between *teaching from the heart* and *losing heart.* She wrote,

> I feel bipolar or something. Some days I do a great lesson and other days I wonder if I taught anyone anything at all. I am losing my heart at this job. Teaching is not for me; I need to consider other careers. I realized this year that I lose my heart when I compare myself to other teachers. I am really critical of myself. I need to realize that I am a good teacher and I don't need to be like everyone else. As an ELD teacher there are some things that I can't do.

Charlie said that her students did not participate in a museum walk that her colleagues designed on historical information, because history was not in the ELD curriculum.

Charlie continued,

> Everyday I feel different. Some days are amazing and I feel like I am truly making a difference by teaching from my heart. However, other days I come home feeling like I have failed. The days that it seems like I am yelling at students or that my students didn't really learn anything makes me reconsider my career...I am not really happy with the phase I'm in currently. If I taught from the heart everyday and did the activities and projects I wanted to do, I might never have a life. When I'm passionate about my work, I often make it consume every hour of my day. I want to be able to leave work and not think about all the things going on at school when I'm at

home. I am struggling with my job becoming my life. I don't want to be that

teacher that stays until seven….

Charlie felt a disconnect between living a healthy life and being a strong

teacher. These made her consider leaving teaching despite the time and money she

had spent on her education, including earning her master's degree in language and

literacy.

Katelyn wavered in the *losing heart* phase:

At this moment, I feel that I am caught between the heart phases. Last year I

was 100% in the losing heart phase. Last year was so hard! Between all

three grade levels with no support [from teachers or administrators] and

difficult kids, I felt myself become a disheartened, lazy teacher…At my best

I was giving about 90%, at my worst about 60%.

With the start of this new school year, I started a new [phase] as well. I am

seeking the take heart stage. I want to be a good teacher for my students.

They deserve to have me at my best. At times I feel like I am absolutely

drowning and I can barely keep my head above water. Why? Because I

absolutely love teaching middle school. There's just something about how

these kids are that makes me stay…

Katelyn said that she was not certain if she was happy with her current teaching

assignment but that she was content with it, "I do know that I'm uber glad that I'm

not in the same mind set as last year. I don't think that I could have survived

another hellish year."

Last year, Katelyn had taught sixth, seventh and eighth graders so she was stretched thinly. She shared that she had a *tough group* of kids in the seventh and eighth grade block. These were ELL students whom she instructed with no support from administrators:

> I knew last year that I was not giving my all. I really didn't want to try any more because what incentive would I get from it? More disrespect from kids and lack of care from administrators? I am glad I started with sixth grade this year; I had a makeover [into the] recovering my heart stage. Last year knocked me down a lot. I am trying to pick myself back up.

Katelyn begged her administrators to assign her different classes the following year. She said that she was a third year teacher last year, contending with a difficult group of students. Because of the negative experience she had she did not know if she would *bounce back* from where she was during her first two years of teaching. "I went from the perfect job to the worst job at school."

I asked the group, "Did you ever write during this?"

Charlie said that during her first year of teaching she started journaling after school, because she had just taken a writing workshop class that suggested that she write in a teaching journal. This was therapeutic for Charlie. During her past two years of teaching; however, she felt too rushed to write. Between attending meetings with colleagues and school clubs, she did not have the time to write. Charlie explained that because her administrators were *being watched* teachers were more heavily scrutinized in their classrooms. This made Charlie focus her attention

on teaching to the mandates of her administrators rather than writing about her teaching.

Katelyn said she used to write in a journal at home. Now she had no time to write in her journal. "Between teaching, coaching, grading, and meetings, when do you have time to write?" The last time she wrote in her journal was, like Charlie, during her first year of teaching. Although the first year of teaching is often the most difficult, Charlie and Katelyn explained that due to standardized testing and the pressures for their students to perform well on their exams, their jobs were more stressful in the past two years than during their first year of teaching.

Next, Charlie said that she had two journals, one as an instructor and a second, personal journal that she wrote in once per week. She stopped writing in her personal journal ever since she was married in March, "One thing I hugely struggle with is making time for [me]. I just don't know how to do it."

Katelyn said that teaching took up so much of her time that when she had a moment to herself, she spent it with her boyfriend. With her five different class preparations and five sets of lesson plans that she had to write per week, she could not write.

Teaching had become increasingly more time consuming and frustrating for the participants since their first year of teaching. This was due to standardized testing, multiple preparations, and more tasks to accomplish than their first year of teaching. Both Katelyn and Charlie talked about punitive school districts, especially toward teachers with low test scores. These were teachers who taught primarily ELD and ELL classes. For example, Charlie said that teachers' test scores were posted on an

overhead at a faculty meeting for teachers to scrutinize one another. This made teachers feel that they had to compare themselves to one another, and improve their scores to be competitive in their departments. In Katelyn's school district, teachers received letters that said they were either *good teachers* or *bad teachers* based on their students' test scores. Those teachers who received *good letters* had students who scored in the top 25% on their exams. These teachers taught in the honors track. The teachers who received *bad letters* had students who scored in the bottom 25% on their exams; these were teachers who instructed ELD and ELL students. The names of the *good teachers* were posted online.

Like Katelyn, Charlie said that teachers received good teaching letters and bad teaching letters in her school district. Teachers were labeled by color according to their administrators' perceptions of their ability. This was modeled after a reading program in which students who read well were classified as *green readers*, students who read at grade level were *yellow students*, and students who read below grade level were labeled as *red students.* Charlie's principal applied this color coding system to the teachers in her school based on student growth and standardized test scores. Teachers labeled as *red teachers* had to turn in weekly lesson plans and had administrators come into their class rooms frequently to assess their instruction. All of the ELD teachers at Charlie's school were labeled *red teachers*. Because this was Charlie's first year instructing ELD students, she worried that she might be labeled as a *red teacher*. She argued that if she were labeled a *red teacher*, "[Administrators] had better give me support to improve [my teaching]."

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We spent the rest of the session voicing our frustration about the pressures that teachers felt in today's school system. I asked,

> Why do teachers have to summarize the lessons that they teach to their administrators? It is akin to doctors summarizing their surgeries and engineers summarizing for their bosses projects that they have completed. Where is the time to teach with all of this?

Katelyn stated, "Either you laugh it off or it eats you alive. That's what we have to deal with in our shitty job...That's why I write humor."

By the end of the session I fell into the role of a secondary classroom teacher and left my identity as graduate student, writer, or researcher. I was angered by the stories that Charlie and Katelyn told me about their administrators. I wanted them to have time to write in their schools, to have a voice in their instruction. I did not want them to feel punished if they taught students who had difficulties with learning; if anything, they should have been admired for working tenaciously with such challenging students.

A few weeks later, Natasha e-mailed me her thoughts regarding the Parker Palmer *heart mantra* quotation:

> I currently feel that I am "losing heart," although that is not where I want to be. I started out teaching with a great deal of enthusiasm and optimism. Many of the veteran teachers found this refreshing, but kept saying, "just give it a few years." After teaching at this school for five years, I find that although a lot has changed and improved, there is still a long way to go. The same frustrations are there on a daily basis, and after years of the same

thing, it gets harder to put up with. With regard to my students, I see so

much potential in them. Yet now I am at the point where three of my former

students have babies, several are in jail, and several have dropped out of

school. It is hard for me to look at my students and expect them to

accomplish so much, knowing all that lies in their way. I don't want to have

this perspective because I really care about all of my students. This is why I

think that it will be for the best for me to leave this school at the end of the

year. I want to be an excellent teacher. Writing allows me to think and

reflect about how I have changed as a teacher, and what goals I have for

myself and my students.

Natasha really cared about her students, but like Katelyn and Charlie felt that

her teaching position was hopeless. Given the educational climate and hurdles that

her students had to navigate even Natasha, who identified herself as a social activist

for her ELD students, did not believe that she could continue to teach any longer.

Session 9: Revisiting the self.

The goal of session 9 was for participants to bring objects that represented their

perceptions of themselves as educators and writers, and reflect upon these items in

their journals. This allowed for me to note any changes in their self perceptions

from session 4 when they initially brought in artifacts that signified their identities

as educators and as writers. Fifty minutes of the session was devoted toward

participants reading their manuscripts aloud to gain feedback from the group. We

also determined where we would meet to celebrate our writing during session 10.

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We began the group setting up a time and place to meet for our last session. I explained that I would make reservations at an Italian restaurant near Charlie's home. We agreed on Tuesday at 5:30. I explained that we would do some last writing in our journals at that session and then eat, drink, and celebrate our writing. I also stated that I would share my sample proposal from NCTE this year as well as the call for proposals for NCTE 2012.

I shared how writing my dissertation had brought me close to the group members:

> When I listen to your conversations and read your writing, I know you guys on a level that you don't know...I listen to you guys talk and I think..."I love how she writes that." It sounds weird but when you spend hours listening to three people [you really get to know them]...you guys are wonderful. You're all so different and interesting....

Perhaps it was not professional of me to share my thoughts about my participants with my participants, but I could not help myself. I was so proud of the great teachers I was working with and I wanted to share this part of the writing process with them.

Next, I asked teachers to journal on the following prompt for 15-20 minutes:

> Who are you? Give some descriptors that qualify who you are. What objects did you bring? What do they signify about you? What do they signify about your perceptions of yourself as a teacher? What do they signify about your perceptions of yourself as a writer? Did the objects change from the first session? What might this signify about you?

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I explained that in answering the question, "Who are you?" they should be careful not to fall into the *ego trap* that I had seen discussed on *Oprah's Life Class Show*.

> [Oprah] has these life class sessions and she did one on the ego. This year has been crazy insane [for me]. I've been trying to battle with my own demons, but [Oprah] mentioned that the ego is that voice of yours that's telling you things, talking to you, but it's not you. It's the thing that society expects of you. So for me, my ego is like, "Man, you should go out and run five miles. It's battling my eating disorder. But it's these things that society tells me; the real me is under there saying 'no you shouldn't do that.' But then the ego is the power trip of me who wants to go do all these other things. So [when] you look at the first thing there that asks "who are you," be careful that you don't fall into the ego trap...

About three minutes into her writing Katelyn asked, "…Do you want to know who we are as a teacher or just about ourselves in general?" I explained that she could interpret the question whatever way she wished.

Katelyn was the first to share her writing:

> It's hard for me to answer [who I am] because there's a lot that I could say...I know what I like and what I don't like. I know how I act and how I don't act. I know what I do and what I don't like to do. I'm a listener and not a talker...I'm dedicated but at times I can be a little bit lazy. I like to work hard for things that I love and people that I love...I'm a person who just wants to be happy...

Katelyn named happiness four times in her discussion; it was of the greatest importance to her.

She continued,

> The artifact that I brought, it broke, which is perfect because it's a rubber band. It's a metaphor [for me as a teacher] because we are stretched beyond belief... We're expected to be so many types of things and be so many types of people... Sometimes rubber bands break, just like teachers. They're stretched too far; sometimes you're gonna break down. ...Usually you can snap back and be yourself but other times, you just break.... I just hope that I'm not going to get stretched to my breaking point. And that's all.

This artifact differed from Katelyn's object that she brought to signify her teaching in session 4, which was a ceramic dish that a student had purchased for her, that reminded her of the love she had for her students during her first year of teaching. Katelyn was more focused, at this point in time, on the stressful entities of her job.

Katelyn did not mention an object that was a metaphor for her writing, so I asked her, "Would you use [this object] to signify you as a writer?." In session 3, she did not have an object that she brought to represent her writing identity because she did not believe that she was a writer. However, during this session she explained,

> I would think [the rubber band] signified me as a writer too because there are different ways that I take writing or that I do see writing and there's so many different options that I quit; I give up...I'm scattered-brained a little bit

when it comes to writing. So when there's too much pressure I'm like ok, I'm

going to stop.

By the ninth session, Katelyn saw herself as a frustrated writer who had options

to write about but did not always have the direction to pursue her ideas. This

contrasted with her beliefs in session 3 when she saw herself as a *black hole* and an

empty vacuum who did not write.

I volunteered to share my entry next, but Natasha stated that she wanted to share

her writing:

I'm somebody who wants to change things. Everything that I do is a lifestyle

thing. Being vegan and the choices I make in my everyday life. Things

really bother me that are unjus...I'm a mentor because I work with the kids

that I have in my classroom and after they have left my classroom, but also

I'm the oldest of five.... I'm the first person in my family to go to college so I

play [mentor to my three brothers and my sister] as well. I am ever-changing

and evolving, learning new things about who I want to be and how I can

make change.

Natasha wrote an additional sentence in her journal that she did not share with

the group, "I'm a writer, or can choose to be one if I put aside my own insecurities--

'who would read this anyway?'" Natasha had retained the same perceptions of

herself that she had in the initial sessions in that she was an activist who aided her

students and family. Unlike earlier sessions, she said that she was a writer, and

acknowledged the insecurities that she had about this identity. This suggests that

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she felt more comfortable sharing this with me after the group met for more sessions.

Natasha said,

> I brought the smarty pants because I brought them last time, so I thought that I'd just bring that. As a teacher I guess it shows that I'm willing to go through a lot to get the kids to do their work, and to be motivated or inspired or whatever. And I let [the students] into my life because I let them destroy my pants [laughter]. And as a writer I take what I write personally and I write things that I care about; and I care about my students, and I care about teaching.

In her journal Natasha continued, "I also take writing seriously. I write about what matters to me. I use writing as a tool to inspire change--or at least that's what I want to do." Natasha's smarty pants were a student artifact similar to the scrapbook that she had brought to session four, in that both contained students' writing and illustrations, and were objects that connected her personally and professionally to her students.

Katelyn commented on how she would use the smarty pants on Monday with her students because she thought that it was a great idea.

I volunteered to share my entry, but Charlie wanted to share hers next. Charlie referred to the demographic profile during the first session when I had asked the teachers to write about a similar prompt:

My husband has told me in the past that I'm a "doer." But then, I think

recently that I can't describe myself that way. I feel like I'm turning into a

person that talks the talk but can't walk the walk. I hate those people.

Charlie said that when people invited her to social gatherings she agreed to

attend, only to back out later. "I'm trying to do too many [activities] and it's not

working out for me... Even in school I'm turning into that person...."

She continued,

As a person I'm passionate. If I'm interested in something, I am fully

engaged. I make an effort to be supportive of others...In class I am strict and

impatient, but I am trying to work on [this]...[I am also] entertaining.

In her journal Charlie wrote that she was a disorganized teacher, "I can keep my

desk clean for about two days out of the week and by the third day, I have so many

piles of papers that I can't find my keys." This was consistent with the information

that she shared in the second session when she said that she was *disorganized* and

impatient. Charlie described her objects for her teaching and writing next:

The object that I brought for me as a writer is a notebook with empty pages

because I don't know, the words are not coming to me. You know on a

personal level, journaling. Even this weekend for Thanksgiving my husband

was hunting and I'm like "I have so much time," but every time I would sit

down, I'd think "I have Christmas presents..." so I have empty pages. ...that's

where I'm at right now.

In her journal, Charlie continued, "I'm really happy with my personal life, but

when I sit [down]to journal I feel almost guilty, and [I] feel that I should just be

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doing something more productive." Charlie was comfortable sharing her flaws with the group. During session 3, Charlie brought a marker as a metaphor for her writing, referring to her childhood. By session 9, she had brought in an adult object, the journal, and had made an attempt to write outside of the group for the first time since her NWP summer institute.

Charlie continued,

> As a teacher, I brought one of my charts off of my bulletin board. I have them for my reading fluency, my math for homework. I started it four weeks ago. I spent so much time making it really artsy...with every goal I'm supposed to put a little star [by the students' names] and at the end of the week, [the students] have all [of their]stars and put [their] names in the bin. And look, there are no stars! And it's not the fact that they haven't made the progress; they made the progress 100%. I have not had the time to even go through and put the stars [into the chart]. Again, I am starting all these things that I just cannot finish. So I thought how does this represent me as a teacher? I feel like I know what I should be doing...I know the curriculum well...but actually doing it, I have a hard time following through.

When I asked Charlie if her administrators required her to use the star chart she said they did not, but she thought that it would be a positive incentive for her students to finish their homework. She also stated that she pressured herself to use the chart because she compared herself to her colleague who used them. This was consistent with earlier sessions in which Charlie revealed that she felt pressured to be a perfect teacher, because she compared herself to her colleagues on her team. In

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session 4, Charlie brought a cotton ball to represent herself as a teacher, because of her *positivity* and *high demands* that she had for her students. She placed these cotton balls in a jar as party points for her students to reach their goals. By the ninth session, Charlie acknowledged that the charts, like the cotton balls, were not being completed because she was over-extended in her teaching duties. Like Katelyn, she was more realistic in this session about the obstacles she faced with her teaching and writing.

I told Charlie that she needed to stop taking on new obligations. Katelyn chimed in and encouraged Charlie to balance her time so that she could *have a life*. She said that a janitor at her school kicked a teacher out of his classroom at 11 pm for staying at school late and filling out IEPs. I reiterated a conversation that I had with my high school students earlier that day, in which I encouraged them to stop comparing themselves to others and become their personal best. I told Charlie, "...be the best Charlie possible."

I shared my entry last:

> I am tenacious, a worker, someone who never quits whether to my
> achievement or detriment. The object that signifies who I am is a turkey
> feather. My husband hunted a turkey last spring and placed the feather in his
> cap as a sign of respect for the bird but also to display that he had hunted
> this elusive animal that was difficult to catch. The feather signifies that I
> have accomplished a lot as an educator. I taught a variety of students from
> different walks of life—from country clubs to the projects, I have worked
> with a variety of students; they have changed me for the better and I hope

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that I have helped them discover the joy[s] of reading and writing. This feather is worn secretly, in my coat pocket, so that no one can see it on display. I do not want to boast about my teaching, only remember it for myself like the elusive turkey that wanders solitarily, hiding from the hunter who might maim and take its life. That being said, the same object is true of my writing. When it comes to the writer in me I want to put that feather in my cap on display. I want professors and teachers to read my writing and learn about what worked for me and my students. I bask in the melody of my abstract, the musicality of my syntax and the sonorous heights of every paragraph that I compose. I am damned proud of my publications; I worked diligently and alone during my graduate school career to accomplish them. The occasional professor helped me revise my writing but really, when it comes down to it, I just kept working. And now, I continue to work, my back to the rising sun in my bedroom as I finish composing the final chapters of my dissertation. Someday, someone, somewhere, will hopefully read its contents and take something beneficial from them.

I explained that I was at the end of a new beginning, especially with my dissertation coming into fruition. "I'm tired and I'm happy and I just...want to find out what will happen next."

Charlie replied, "It's like starting a new adventure; you don't really know what road you'll take but you're going somewhere..."

Katelyn said, "You're not stuck somewhere." I felt saddened by Katelyn's comment although I know she meant well. I hoped that she did not feel stuck in her

job and that she was happy with teaching. I explained that like her comment earlier, I wanted to be happy. I had become so caught up in the *doing* that I had lost myself. Now, I was rediscovering who I was personally and professionally. I explained that when I became an English education professor I wanted to change policies in K-12 education to make the job more manageable for teachers.

I replied,

> Without [K-12 teachers] professors would not have a job... I would feel like a hypocrite if I encouraged my English education students to become teachers, especially when I thought that the job was so demanding that I could no longer do it.

Next, teachers praised, questioned and polished their pieces. Katelyn shared her newest editions to her manuscript, including a prologue, first chapter, and fifth chapter that her friend had added on the problems with going on maternity leave and being a K-12 teacher. This teacher mentored a student-teacher before her maternity leave, whom she hoped could take over her classes while she was gone. Later, this teacher discovered that her student teacher was bipolar and would flirt with the staff. While she was on maternity leave, the student-teacher cussed out her third period students and stormed out of the room. We laughed at Katelyn's stories. She asked for advice on how to make her paragraphs flow if she made them more serious to share with readers the seriousness of the issues that she wrote about. This was the first time that she said that her writing was anything more than silly and that she wanted to have a more powerful effect on her audience. This suggested that

Katelyn was establishing an identity as a writer, an identity that she did not have in the first writing group sessions.

We made suggestions on how to make her writing serious. Charlie diverged from my suggestions on changing the last paragraph and stated, "I think [your writing] is perfect..." She suggested that Katelyn keep each chapter humorous and then end each chapter with a moral about education. Katelyn loved the idea. This was the most elaborative comment that Charlie had made on the group's writing and was the first time that she countered another group member's comments.

I told Katelyn that she should present at NCTE. Katelyn laughed at this idea, "I could lose my job." I told her that she did not need to tell her school the details on what she was presenting. Katelyn explained, "I've fallen in love with [this manuscript!]. I think that I'm pretty good at [writing satire]." I agreed and stated that I could not write that way.

This was a break-through moment for Katelyn, who up until this moment, did not feel like a writer.

Charlie chimed in and said, "[Your writing] is so relatable." Charlie was more comfortable with commenting on the group's writing as our sessions progressed.

Natasha handed out her manuscript next. Since it was lengthy, I encouraged her to share selections with the group that we had not read. I told her that I would read it over and write comments on it for next time if she wished. Natasha shared an interest in this. Congruous with the group's suggestions from previous sessions, Natasha wrote a personal narrative about her relationship with Kevin. She described

the first time that Kevin had read an extensive passage from his workbook to the class:

> I will never forget the joy on Kevin's face as he read that passage. The junior high reading teacher happened to be walking by the classroom at that exact moment. I pulled her into the classroom, and she started to cry as Kevin read through the passage. All of the inadequacies I felt as a first year teacher dissolved for that one moment. The daily struggles within the classroom were wearing me thin by the end of each day, and I often questioned whether I was accomplishing anything at all besides keeping the students working and contained. Here, though, I could see that at least some of my effort was not in vain.

Natasha wrote about a field trip that Kevin had gone on with her class to a baseball park. During the trip, he had thrown tantrums and stolen a woman's purse. Natasha described the anger that she felt toward Kevin's misbehaviors:

> That field trip was one of the worst days of my teaching career. As soon as we got off [of] the bus, Kevin refused to stand in line with the rest of the students to receive his free lunch, and goodie bag. He kept wandering off into the crowd. When I got him to return to the line, he became angry and started causing a scene. Upon entering the stadium, Kevin left my side and ran off into the crowd, which consisted of thousands of people. I didn't know what to do. I left Ms. Meyers with the rest of the students and ran off to find him. He was a short boy and wearing the same exact T-shirt as every other student in the crowd. Somehow I spotted him, standing along the

railing with a crowd of adults, watching "The National Anthem" being

performed. My whole body was pulsing with rage. I had yelled at the

students before when I was extremely displeased, but that was nothing

compared to how angry I felt at this moment. I had given this student the

opportunity to go on a trip despite what everyone else had told me, and this

is how I was being repaid. I had spent so much of my time helping him and

standing up for him, and here he was, running away into a crowded baseball

stadium to satisfy his own whims. I could feel the people around me staring

as I shouted at Kevin, and I didn't care. The stress of that school year had

brought me to a breaking point in that one moment.

After Natasha had finished reading, Charlie explained that she wanted Natasha

to describe the scene where she screamed at Kevin. She thought that it would add

excellent detail to the story, "I want to see the rage!" Katelyn felt the same. Natasha

explained, "I don't know what I would do with [my story]."

I responded, "There is plenty that you could do with [your story]." Natasha also

sent me her NWP piece that was an article about teaching special education. I

explained, "There's venues that we could look at online. There are places that will

publish teachers' stories and also an article on special education. The issue isn't

what, the issue is where, for all of you, including you..." I looked at Charlie.

Charlie laughed, "I don't really even have anything." I replied, "You have

excellent vignettes."

Charlie said that her writing was *ridiculous.* I said it was not and encouraged her

to share her writing with us for feedback. I also suggested that the participants apply

to present their writing at NCTE under the umbrella of teacher narratives. They could each have 30 minutes to share their writing. I also explained that they might present their writing separately but then they would be paired up with other people from different places. I explained that I would share my proposal from NCTE 2011 with them that was divided into three segments as well.

Katelyn suggested that Charlie add some student reflections to her piece. She discussed the example of a friend who interviewed ELL students, and included their narratives in her writing. Katelyn spoke with confidence when she relayed this information. Charlie and Katelyn were giving writing advice that was more extensive than the first session, indicative of their growing confidence as writers.

Since Charlie's husband had just walked through the front door, she demanded that he go upstairs while she shared her vignettes. She read in a loud, clear voice. She told a story about how a low-income student in her class had purchased white-board markers for her. She kept saying "This is so ridiculous that I am sharing this," to which we encouraged her to continue reading.

Charlie read,

> There are certain days that a teacher's students touch their heart. I have had some very minute moments of kindness from my students this week. On Tuesday morning, right after we entered into the class and got ready for our day, Issis approached me with something clearly hidden under her tightly zipped sweater. Before I could say anything, she whipped out a large pack of whiteboard markers, placed the package in my hand, and smiled widely at me. Issis is a quiet and intelligent student. She is tall for a fifth grader and

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her ears, which are a little too big for her head, stick out of her tightly pulled back hair. She is absolutely darling! I tell her how thrilled I am and thankful for my new whiteboard markers.

Charlie continued,

In all honesty, I was shocked by this unexpected gesture. Knowing the economic status of the students in my class, I can't believe my gift. I am almost positive that whoever bought the markers, Issis or her parents, must have saved up for them. I begin to wonder if I should accept the markers? Still, this gift was so thoughtful, because it was something I needed so badly. I had given out all of my white board markers for students to use and was left with only the dried out ones. As I begin to go over the problems already written on the board, I make a big deal of my new markers. I pop the cap off the bright lime green marker and announce how excited I am about my new markers! Issis only looks downward, trying to hide her smile, and act[ed] like it was nothing.

She also shared a vignette about a boy who invited her to join a stamp club. Charlie's entire class held up their arms marked by their club's stamp while she assumed that the class was working.

Katelyn exclaimed, "That's adorable! I like how [your writing] is dated like journal entries. I like it a lot!"

Natasha explained,

It reminds me of *Letters of a Young Teacher*, have you read that? Jonathan

Kozol? He writes to this teacher about all these things that happen during

the teaching day that are important. Not like test scores...but the little things.

I suggested that Charlie read over Kozol's book and write her vignettes as a

response to his work. In this way, she could connect her teaching vignettes to the

common theme of powerful teaching stories. Charlie replied, "That would be pretty

awesome!"

I asked, "What do you guys think?"

Charlie responded, "I don't know. I guess we keep writing."

Session 10: Celebrations and successes.

The goal of session 10 is was for the participants to celebrate their writing over

dinner and discuss and determine whether they wanted to present their writing at an

academic conference. Lastly, we scheduled when I would interview them.

We met at an Italian restaurant, at 5:30 on a Tuesday evening. I gave the

participants information on K-12 teaching grants, through NCTE, that they could

apply for and that I would help them work on their applications if they were

interested. Next, I disseminated the application for NCTE 2012 and the sample

proposal that I had written for it. In the proposal I described the research that I had

compiled from my study with our writing group. "Read over my proposal for a few

minutes and try to think about your own work and how you might compose your

proposal. Use this as an example."

 When the teachers had finished reading the proposals, Charlie exclaimed, "This

is so interesting!" I explained that NCTE had a web-link that would assist them in

writing their proposals and that I would also support them with any help that they needed.

> If you want to write a proposal and you want help from me, e-mail it to me. Notice my first paragraph I situate it in the research and then I talk about what I'm going to do. If you would need help with research sources [for your proposals] I could even do that. I don't mind e-mailing you articles or whatever.

Charlie asked, "And we can do anything. It's easy to relate to [the conference theme] Dream, Connect, Ignite! Like our dream of the classroom? What we envision?"

I explained, "Whatever you want to connect [to the conference theme]. [NCTE] purposely make [the conference theme] vague like that so that..."

Charlie finished, "[So that]...people can connect to it."

I replied,

> Exactly. If you look at the proposal form, the part that you fill out asks you to check off which topics yours would be. Is it reading? Is it writing? The sessions ask with whom you would present. If you notice you can have up to three [presenters]. That's the other thing I mentioned. If you wanted to [present] together I wouldn't mind chairing your session. And you guys could put your [writing] together...

I disseminated my sample proposal from NCTE 2011 that I had put together with a professor and two other graduate students. I used this as a model to show the teachers what a group proposal might look like:

If you notice, the professor wrote the first few paragraphs using the research [in our field] and then we had speaker one, two and three [write summaries of their presentations] and we connected [our writing to one another]. If you put in together, I don't mind putting in the research information at the beginning.

I was fulfilling the role of a mentor and a professor as I worked with the teachers. I knew that I could make the process of applying for an academic conference less intimidating since I had done it before. I told the group that they could each write their separate paragraphs, on their writing, and then we could condense them into one document under the theme of teacher narratives. "It's something to think about. Proposals are due January 17th but you don't need your piece done until [next year]." I also assured the teachers that it was ok for them to change their topics later in the year after they had applied.

I told the teachers that I would e-mail them in early January to help them with composing a proposal if they were interested. "What are your thoughts on it?"

Charlie said, "When we talk about it I get so many ideas in my head, and I want to do something...a research project, or something on an after school club." Charlie, who had been the most reluctant writer throughout our sessions, had the most interest in presenting at the conference. However, Charlie and Katelyn explained that they were so overwhelmed with teaching that they did not know how they would find the time to apply and present.

Katelyn said, "It sounds great. I would love to do it, but I don't know how feasible it is."

I replied,

> Let me put it this way, you guys have done the majority of the work. You
> already have things to share, so to write up a paragraph proposal at this
> point, it's not that much more work. I'm encouraging you not to pressure
> you, but mostly because I think once you [present] you'll think "this is so
> cool, I want to do this again."

Charlie asked, "What is [attending a conference] like? Paint me a picture?"

Katelyn followed, "Should we just go to one first?"

I told them that it would be best to present if they were going to spend the
money to register and attend.

I explained that the majority of the sessions were on a Friday, Saturday, and
Sunday. I explained the process of selecting sessions to attend:

> When you [present] your session you usually get to your room 30 minutes
> prior. If you have a laptop you want to hook up or a Power Point, there are
> technology people that will help you with setting it up, and you indicate that
> on your proposal... You can make 10 handouts. There are so many people
> presenting at once that you will probably get 10-15 people.

I shared my first experience in presenting at NCTE with the group. It was in
Philadelphia; I presented my research on a Sunday at noon and had two people
attend. Most of the participants had flown home from the conference.

I continued,

It's really not that intimidating. If you're worried about what you would say...a lot of [presenters are] teachers that are sharing their work. Some of its professors but it's very teacher oriented...

I reassured the group that the conference was not stuffy because I did not want the teachers to feel intimidated by professors who might attend their session. This statement indicates the divide that often exists between the university and K-12 schools.

Katelyn asked, "How long is the presentation then?"

I replied,

Presentations are usually about 100 minutes or so. ...You leave like 10-15 minutes for a question and answer sessions. ...if you read your writing and have the group journal on something that would take like 30-40 minutes. And then you can do a discussion on your classroom or something.

Natasha said,

[One hundred minutes] seems like a really long time. If you guys wanted to present together...the proposal would be less time consuming...and then you each [could] have about 25 minutes to talk, and you've got question and answers.

Charlie asked how long their papers needed to be, "There has to be a paper, right?"

I answered, "No [there doesn't need to be a paper]. Some people go and present their students' artwork. You can present whatever you want..."

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I told the teachers about some of the different topics that are at NCTE including young adult literature and teacher research. I also stated my disappointment in 2011's sessions, "In terms of sessions on teacher writing, there were very few. And the year before there was a few more on [this topic] where teachers wrote stories. This year, there was nothing like it. That's why it's so important that people see that teachers write."

Charlie explained that she had written a personal narrative on her recent car accident for her Personal Learning Community at her school. Since her PLC was teaching their fifth graders how to write narratives, she wrote a sample to share with the students. She explained, "We're forced to do this [selected] prompt...Students choose their own topics. I [wrote] everything that I ask them to [write]. I brainstormed and then I wrote a [personal narrative as an example] for them. They were so into it. It's so cute."

I explained, "That would be a great study right there. Here's what I wrote with my kids and here's what they ended up coming out with."

Charlie said, "Yeah, I think it does help so much showing [students] your own writing."

Natasha and Katelyn agreed that when they wrote with their students, the students were more enthusiastic about writing. Natasha explained:

> I told my [students] about the writing group and they're like, "What do you
> mean you write?" I'm like, "I'm writing about class and working here" and
> they're like, "Are we in it?" And I said, "Maybe. Some of you might be."
> And they're like,"What do you say about us?"

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I said that my findings on this study suggest that teachers be given the time to write in school rather than performing mundane professional development activities. I explained that I would advocate for teachers to write in school as I continued in my professional activities. I stated that if they were worried about writing during the school day, the best way to accomplish this was to write with their students. "When [your students are writing in class] help [your students] with their writing, but then you write alongside them. …as you mentioned, there's no time to fit [writing in] later."

We ended the evening discussing the poor professional development activities in our schools. I told the group that when I presented at conferences, I gained self esteem. "You're not willing to just do [stuff] because [administrators] tell you to do it."

We all agreed that we did not take our administrators' professional development goals seriously, particularly since they changed every two years.

Katelyn said, "If you can't hold my attention, how am I going to hold a 12 year olds' attention?"

Katelyn followed up our discussion by asking, "How did you get into [presenting]?"

I replied, "Grad school. I wouldn't even know this existed [without my PhD program]."

Katelyn explained that if not for our writing group she would not know that NCTE existed, and that she could write and present information on her classroom. I explained that there were K-12 teachers at the conference whose school districts

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provided them with funds to attend the conference, but that our state did not provide the funding or information to its teachers to participate in these professional activities.

We ended the evening discussing our school's programs, including AVID and Advanced Placement classes, and scheduled the interviews that I would conduct with the teachers in two weeks.

Although the teachers showed interest in presenting their work at the National Council for Teachers of English Conference in November 2012, during our interviews, Charlie and Katelyn said that they needed more time to work on their writing. They wanted to present in 2013, after they had more time to polish their work. Natasha showed an interest in presenting in 2012, but she had not contacted me since the winter break. I did not want to continue to remind her of the conference because I did not want to place unnecessary pressure on her, particularly during her busy teaching semester.

Chapter 4: Summary and Conclusions

Summary of Findings

The following chapter shares a summary of the findings on what the three participants reported about their identities as educators and as writers. Findings evolved from field notes taken at the writing group sessions, from teachers' journals, and their manuscripts. The interview protocol was written as an open ended prompt so that teachers could reflect on their writing after the community had ended with less influence from the researcher.

After I coded and analyzed the data, one of the emerging themes was that the teachers were unconfident writers. The community fostered a rich setting for teachers to share their stories about their schools comfortably with this lack of confidence. Teacher's writing included narratives of oppressive administrators, restrictive curriculum, and losing integrity in light of this curriculum.

This chapter is organized according to major themes that were discovered in teachers' journals, narratives, discussions, and interviews. The chapter begins with a discussion of teachers' identities as educators and as writers. Next, I discuss other themes that emerged during the study including:

1. Writing

2. The Writing Community

3. School Communities

4. Classroom Communities

5. School Administrators

6. Teacher-Mentors

The discussion of teachers' writing is intermingled with their teaching. This is an important finding in and of itself because it shows that teachers' identities are convergent; writing is not something that can be completely separated from teaching because it stems from teachers' personal experiences which are grounded in their classroom experiences. Teaching is an important part of the participants' lives. Although they wanted to write about their teaching, they had not figured out a way to balance writing and teaching during the school year. The majority of this chapter unveils teachers' frustrations with their schools. These shared frustrations brought the group together.

Teacher Identity

Identities that are connected to childhood experiences.

All three participants discovered, through the writing community, that their teaching is greatly connected to their childhood experiences. Charlie said that her older brother was the *overachiever.* School came easily for him and he rarely studied. Because of this experience, Charlie explained that she remained passive and a good listener but was not a leader. Because her brother took charge of situations she was used to staying in the background. This affected other factions of her life in that she was passive with her teaching colleagues as well as in her relationship with her husband, whom she allowed to make most decisions. When she was in her classroom, however, she did take charge because she was the only adult in the room.

Like Charlie, Katelyn's teaching was connected to her childhood. She often felt different because of her red hair and "freckles that cover every inch of my body."

So when she applied for a teaching job she taught middle school, because she wanted her students to feel more comfortable with their own appearances, particularly during this time of adolescence that can be an awkward stage. Katelyn also described her sibling as affecting her personality which permeated her writing and teaching. Her sister was a more serious, self absorbed person. Katelyn used humor to make light of family situations and play off of her sister's morose nature. This humor permeated Katelyn's role in the writing community and her classroom, where she poked fun at herself to make her students feel more comfortable about themselves.

Natasha's teaching and writing were connected to her experiences with her autistic brothers, one of whom has autism and the other who is learning disabled. She witnessed the poor treatment they received in a good suburban district back East and saw how her mother fought for her brothers to gain access to a quality education, and special education services. When Natasha stumbled into a special education position in Teach for America, she fueled her anger about her brothers' treatment and used it to fight for her learning disabled students. Natasha's writing and teaching reflected this with her social activist manuscripts. Findings from this study suggest that teachers' personal experiences are important to their professional backgrounds. These experiences must be explored within school communities for teachers to learn more about their teaching and explore who they are and who they wish to become in their classrooms. This supports the literature that has been developed on teacher identity which is greatly connected to their family history, stories, and life experiences.

Dual identities.

Charlie felt like she had to *go along* with the instructional suggestions of her colleagues and administrators. She felt *like a robot* because of this. Charlie had constructed a dual identity. Outside of her classroom she supported her administrators' suggestions like teaching writing from a workbook; on the other hand, her true teaching identity was different. Charlie wanted to share her writing with her students using a workshop approach. She believed that the latter method of teaching writing was more beneficial for her students. However, Charlie was fearful that she would get caught straying from the other teachers and be penalized if she proceeded with teaching writing using this workshop approach.

Katelyn also felt pressures from a school system that she believed was unreasonable. Like Charlie, she talked about a dual identity that she had constructed for administrators and herself. Other professions, like law and the medical field, encourage dual identities. For example, lawyers often advocate for individuals who they know are guilty and argue their innocence, yet lawyers know from the beginning that this is part of the job and make a choice to do so. Doctors also know that because of insurance costs and lack of client coverage, they may not be able to administer the best care to all of their patients. Like the legal profession, it is clear to doctors that they may have to construct these dual identities before they are licensed to practice medicine. However, teachers are under the impression that they can be honest in their classrooms and make a difference in students' lives. There is no teacher education class, to my knowledge, that explains that educators may have to teach lessons in their classrooms that are not in the best interest of their students.

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In fact, the opposite is taught in that teachers are afforded freedom in their preparation programs to construct lessons based on their students' needs. This is where teaching can be a misleading career as it is only after teachers receive their positions that they often discover a lack of freedom in their jobs.

Katelyn's dual identity differed from Charlie's. She named her first identity, "Ms. S." Ms. S. was proper in school, followed the rules, and complied with administrators' requests, taking on an extra preparation, and teaching to the test. The authentic Katelyn was funny, sarcastic, and inquisitive. Katelyn felt that she was incapable of motivating her students. She said that there was nothing that she could do for them if they did not already have a *love for learning.* This belief may have been fostered because of the falsely constructed identity that she had constructed for herself in her classroom. Unlike Charlie, however, Katelyn had accepted her two identities. Charlie still struggled with them and was disappointed with herself because she could not teach with the integrity she desired.

Unlike Charlie and Katelyn, Natasha had abandoned her dual identity during her first year of teaching. In her manuscript she wrote,

> The Curriculum Specialist during training at the TFA [Teach for America] Summer Institute advised us that a teacher should never let the students see him or her smile until after Thanksgiving. This did not fit my personality nor did it work with the population of students in my classroom. These were kids who had been sitting through classes where teachers scared them into believing that they were stupid. They had been so afraid of making a mistake that they stopped trying. By the end of my first year I had developed

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my *teacher persona,* but I started out trying all kinds of different styles and approaches. The one thing that immediately worked was to show my students that I was human and that we had to work together to make the classroom work.

She continued,

During the first few weeks of school, my students asked me all kinds of questions: they wanted to know how old I was, whether I was married or had a boyfriend, etc. At first, I did not tell the students anything about myself. I had been told to keep my personal and teaching lives separate. After a while, however, I began telling the kids more about myself, and this helped me to establish a relationship with them. The kids felt special when I told them stories about my childhood or even about something that had happened on the way home from school the previous day. Some of them did not have a bond with any other adult in their lives. My classroom really started to become a family that year. Most of the students came to eat lunch with me in the classroom each day. Many of the students stayed [with me after school] or called me at home when they had trouble with their homework. I was invited to family parties. I went to church with Kevin. I kept in frequent contact with the parents and families. These things were more important than any lessons I taught in reading, writing, and math. I spent the first six months of the school year establishing relationships so that I could better teach reading, writing, and math.

Natasha recognized early that if she was going to connect with student in special education programs and help them learn in her classroom, she had to be herself. She constructed an identity that embodied who she was as an educator without abandoning her personal traits. By humanizing her instruction, and unifying her personal and professional identities, Natasha was able to forge a strong stance on who she was as an educator and a writer.

However, Natasha feared losing her autonomy if she left her *bad school*. She worried that if she went to a school with more funding and more supplies, her new administrators would make her teach prescribed curriculum that was not best for her students. Natasha explained that such a school would strip her of her integrity and what she knew was best for her students. Natasha's identification with herself as a *teacher activist* resonated with her writing, in which she wrote as a social activist. Natasha's clear vision of herself as a teacher and writer contrasted with Katelyn and Charlie's identities. Katelyn and Charlie often felt disingenuous as teachers and felt unclear about their writing identities. This study suggests that it is more difficult for teachers to develop writing identities when they suppress their personal identities in their classrooms.

Fear of becoming an ineffective educator.

Charlie was anxious about becoming a *bad teacher*. She noted that she was sometimes impatient with her students. She was worried that she vented her frustrations over ineffective school policies on them. She explained that she was *disappointed* with herself: "[I] let the pressure get to me." She had high expectations for her students and saw herself as a *manager* who monitored good

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and bad student behavior. Charlie may have projected this persona because of the managerial subjugation she had experienced with her school administrators, who scrutinized Charlie and her colleagues over curricular decisions. This connected with Charlie's journal entries in which she described her writing from the perspective of a child who was inexperienced and lost.

Charlie used the childhood setting of the circus to describe her classroom. She said that she was a circus leader, who constantly put out fires in her classroom, running to each student to teach quickly and frantically, only to move onto the next topic. Her classroom did not display her warm, calm presence which permeated in the writing group.

Unlike the other two participants, Katelyn had a teaching identity that was contradictory. She used humor to cope with the serious situations that she had encountered in teaching, and she wrote this in her journal. However, Katelyn's impressions of her teaching fluctuated. During the first three sessions of the writing group, Katelyn said that she was a hard working teacher who wanted to produce hard working students. The verb *produce* suggests a capitalistic notion of education; students are commodities that are crafted by the laborer or teacher. This complies with the business model of teaching that was implemented in schools across the United States following an industrial notion of education, which sees students as commodities or parts on an assembly line that are produced by the manufacturer or school (Callahan, 1964) .

During the third sessions Katelyn wrote in her journal,

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I'd like to think I'm an inspiration to students, a person they can trust, a

person that they can respect. So I guess I know who I am to my students but

I've lost, never found who I am to me.

This comment contradicted with Katelyn's opinion of herself during the fourth

session, in which she stated that she knew who she was as a teacher. In later

sessions, Katelyn stated that she had little control over her students' achievement.

This confusion in identity coheres with Katelyn's writing identity which she

depicted as *a black hole*; this empty space suggests lack of clarity and purpose in

her writing.

Natasha did not fear losing her teaching integrity but feared losing her ability to

do her best for students if she left her school. She consistently identified herself as a

social advocate for her students who were in special education. For Natasha,

teaching was polarized in that an educator could teach with truth and integrity, and

ignore the constraints of the educational system, or they could sell-out to the

fictitious skill and drill approach of teaching that many school districts mandated.

Teachers' *practices* **disconnected the group.**

Wenger (1998) defines practice as "…the doing [of the job] in a historical and

social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do…" (Wenger, 1998, p.

46). These practices generated tension among some of the participants. For

example, Natasha was bothered by Katelyn's manuscript because she believed that

is made fun of special education students. Natasha did not speak out against

Katelyn's writing because she did not want to be perceived as a *goodie two-shoes***:**

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At times when I was reading my piece I felt like the other two [participants]
thought that I was judging them because I'm a special education teacher and
they're the two general education teachers...Sometimes I judged [the other
two participants]. When [Katelyn wrote] the funny piece about teaching I
thought it was really funny but then the part came up about special ed
students, and I did not think that was funny, but I didn't want to say anything
because I didn't want to be like...that person [a goodie two-shoes].

Natasha thought the special education comments in Katelyn's piece were
demoralizing the population of students that she protects. Natasha did explain that
she trusted the writing community. "I wouldn't have shared something as heartfelt
in the community [if I didn't trust the other teachers]."

Abandoning their teaching identities.

Sadly, all of the teachers wanted to leave their schools. Charlie asked Katelyn
about teaching in middle rather than elementary school, inquiring, "Is it as stressful
as elementary school?" Katelyn perceived that she would not be at her school for
more than two years because she did not know if she could keep subjecting herself
to meetings and other school routines that did little for her students. Charlie also
wanted to leave her school because she did not know how long she would have the
energy to keep up with the work that her job entailed. All three teachers were
physically exhausted and that they did not have time to use the restroom, eat, or
drink during the school day. Their lunches were filled with meetings with both
students and staff.

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When teachers are asked to put on false identities, and be disingenuous in their classrooms, they are disempowered from staying in the profession. Through our conversations, every week, teachers revealed their stressors candidly. With each story that was told about a poor school leader or unsupportive colleague, the participants felt more compelled to consider other career options. Narrating these events allowed for the teachers to express emotions that they had hidden and explore different career options. It also brought upon some warranted fears. For example, Katelyn acknowledged that she might have to find a new teaching job, if she lost her job because she published information about her school that or administrators that made them pejorative to the public.

Positive student relationships.

All of the teachers enjoyed working with their students. Charlie loved helping her ELD students with their work, and felt great joy teaching a class that *nobody else wanted to teach*. She was saddened by the close relationship she had forged with Esperanza, a student who had left during the middle of the semester to move back to Mexico. Katelyn felt most connected to her students during her first year of teaching, when she bonded with a little girl who had brought her a ceramic vase with the word *love* written on it. She kept the jar on her desk as a reminder of this student, who worked hard in her class and had looked up to her:

> Every time I see [the jar] I am reminded of my first year of teaching--my
> favorite year. I think of my students (now sophomores in high school) and I
> think of my friends on my seven purple team. I am reminded of that passion
> I had as a new teacher that now seems to hide away in deep, dark places

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sometimes. This little container really does a lot more for me than just hold

my paper clips.

Katelyn had a special connection with her students and her colleagues on the

seven purple team during her first year of teaching; however, Katelyn did not

mention many other relationships with her students after her first year of

instruction.

Natasha often talked about her challenging special education students with

adoration and how they learned despite their difficulties at home. This was a

culmination of her family experiences. One of her brothers is learning disabled and

the other is autistic. Neither of them received adequate educational services. This

angered Natasha who believes that her brothers would have achieved more if they

had the support that they needed during their K-12 education. Natasha continued to

write about Kevin, the student who *no teacher could handle*. She enjoyed serving

this student who had no parental or community support. Natasha's personal artifact

that demonstrated her teaching, unlike Katelyn and Charlie's, was a scrapbook

containing personal artifacts that she had saved from her students, including letters,

illustrations, cards and pictures. She wanted a keepsake that she could read

whenever she wished. Her second teaching artifact was also personalized by her

students; it was her pair of smarty pants, which her students had signed and

decorated.

Natasha felt most connected to her students of the three participants. This

may have been because of her small class sizes which were around 10 students as

well as the role she fulfilled as their *teacher-advocate.* Natasha wrote that her relationships with her students had evolved:

> My fifth year of teaching was a bit different, because for the first time, I was working with a group of students that had started with me as sixth graders. I really felt as if I was watching these kids grow up. I could now see the progress they were making over the course of three years, and it was astounding. This group was comprised of diverse personalities and academic abilities, and after growing accustomed to being in the same small class for three years, they were quite comfortable and open with each other when in my class.

Natasha also wrote about a student who she had forged a positive relationship with in her fifth year of teaching:

> Noll could be a serious disruption in my own class. He got into a fight in the middle of reading class with another student because his constant rude remarks finally brought a classmate to his breaking point. He spent class talking about girls and detracting his peers from their work. After a while, I decided that I would have to break out the policy I used only for the most disruptive students, which was to call home every single night to report to... parents. I let Noll know that this would be happening, and reminded him that the phone call could be either positive or negative in nature. Soon Noll was staying on top of his assignments and the poor behavioral choices were minimized drastically.

She continued,

After a few conversations with mom, I also began to find out how much Noll loved my class. He bragged to his friends and family about what an awesome teacher I was, telling everyone that I was not married, nor did I have children, because I was devoting my time to my students. He was overly impressed by the fact that I called home every single day, stating that I "couldn't get enough" of my students, and that I considered the kids my own family.

Conversations like this showed me that Noll felt special because he was in my class. Perhaps a teacher had never devoted so much attention to ensuring his success. I laughed that day when I found out how Noll perceived our class and also me as his teacher. I thought back to the way Noll had spoken of school two years prior, and it had always been in negative terms. At this point, he had progressed three grade levels in reading. He had gone from writing two sentences to composing two pages of thoughtful prose. He was using tools to aid in his retention of math concepts, and working successfully on grade-level math standards without constant individualized assistance. I didn't hear him talking about dropping out of school anymore, although he did express a great deal of anxiety about going to high school.

Natasha recognized that she was a large force in positively shaping her students' futures. The positive affects that Natasha made on her students encouraged her to stay in the teaching profession.

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Writing

 Teachers do not have time to write.

 All of the teachers voiced that they once loved to write, but once they became language arts educators, they did not have the time to do so. Charlie and Katelyn both had journals that they kept during their first year of teaching, but due to increased demands at their schools had abandoned this practice. Natasha kept a blog over the summers but did not have time to write in it over the school year. Although their National Writing Project summer institute had inspired the participants to write throughout the summer, once the school year started, they felt that there was no time to pursue this passion. All of the participants believed that writing within their schools would alleviate stress and help them explore their teaching and learning. They also explained that due to the emphasis on standardized testing and politics of school, it was unrealistic that teacher writing groups could be formed.

 These findings suggest that participants stopped writing once they started their second year of teaching because of increased demands with standardized testing. Yet when teachers write it can inspire their students to write authentically (Atwell, 1987; Graves, 1990; Powell, 2012). Teachers should be encouraged to write during their school day about their instruction and student learning. This inquiry can lead teachers toward becoming better teachers and writers who feel confident about instructing their students. For example, by the end of session 9, all three participants were eager to present their writing to a larger audience, whether at an academic conference or through a publication. Initially, Katelyn and Charlie did not see themselves as writers and did not like sharing their writing.

Teachers' progressive confidence in their writing.

Initially, it was difficult for the participants to identify themselves as writers. Charlie and Katelyn lacked confidence in their writing and explained that they felt intimidated when they were asked to write. They only referred to their childhoods when asked to describe a time when they felt confident as writers. When asked about a piece of writing that they had composed that was important to them, none of the participants discussed the manuscripts that they had written just one year earlier for their NWP summer institute. This was particularly striking since Katelyn had published a piece, in her institute's NWP bulletin, about how meaningful her experience in the summer institute was to her teaching. Findings suggest that for NWP to change teachers' attitudes toward writing and authorship it must be sustained through mini-workshops and writing projects after the institute. For example, Katelyn began posting her manuscript on Google docs. She added chapters to her manuscript that she began calling a book. She referred to herself as *good at [writing satire].* This was different from her initial sessions where she explained that she was not a writer.

Natasha was the only participant who felt initially confident in her writing in that she believed it was her mission to write about her special education students, and convey the inequities that they had suffered to the public. It is noteworthy that Natasha was an English major not an education major in college and that this may account for her confidence with writing. Both Charlie and Katelyn said that they did not write reflectively in their teacher preparation programs.

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When asked to share a piece of writing that she had written that was important, Natasha wrote about her master's thesis:

> Probably the most important writing task I have worked on was my undergraduate senior thesis at Providence College. I wrote on gender construction in *The House of Mirth*, integrating my work from both my English and women's studies majors. I wrote my thesis as an independent study student, so I had to plan my research, writing, and advisor meetings on my own. This was one of the most rewarding experiences I had in college and as a writer. I really enjoyed meeting with my advisor and formulating my arguments through discussion, conducting research on a topic that I had selected, and doing the actual writing over the course of a semester. My thesis was awarded the highest honor for writing at Providence College that year. I also had to present my thesis to a group of English majors, friends, and family in a symposium forum. The reviews of my thesis were all very positive. It gave me a lot of confidence in my writing and my work. I had been working on something for an entire semester which only I had seen, along with my advisor. When people read it and actually thought it was a legitimately good piece of academic writing, it validated all of the work I had done.

The success that Natasha had experienced in writing and presenting her master's thesis had allowed for her to identify herself as a writer. She had the opportunity to select a topic that was meaningful and conducted research on it with the support of

a college mentor, who had experience in working with new writers. This afforded

Natasha confidence in her writing that the other participants did not experience

Although Charlie was extroverted, she did not like to share her writing with

others. She used to share her writing in her classroom with her students as a model

for their assignments. However, her newly mandated district curriculum caused her

to stray from writer's workshop and teach writing in an *inauthentic way.* Charlie's

writing reflected her lack of confidence. For example, after the first session, she

deleted her manuscript because it was imperfect. She did not want anyone to see her

errors. She often apologized for any grammar and spelling mistakes. She wrote in

sporadic brief vignettes and changed topics frequently. In our initial sessions, she

wrote about her chaotic school and her teaching day. By session 7, she started a new

vignette that illustrated her worry over a young female student who had left for

Mexico during the middle of the semester. Toward the end of the writing group, in

session 9, she acknowledged that she could piece her teaching vignettes together

into a cohesive manuscript. By the last session, Charlie was interested in presenting

at academic conferences and at the end of the sessions, was interested in writing

more and presenting the following year. This suggests that Charlie was becoming

more comfortable with writing and sharing her writing as the writing sessions

progressed.

Katelyn's confidence as a writer also grew. Like Charlie, she was interested in

presenting her writing in a year. Unlike Charlie, Katelyn wrote humorous teaching

stories. She had outlined some brief chapters for a book that her colleagues and she

had discussed writing. She liked to vent her frustrations, using humor to escape her

painful teaching memories. Unlike Charlie and Katelyn, Natasha wrote in detail about a few specific events. These included teaching a difficult special education student named Kevin how to read. She premised her writing with a description of her first classroom, and then interwove a few stories about her special education students, and how she forged relationships with her students once she was willing to reveal who personality in the classroom. All of the teachers agreed that like teaching, writing must be done with integrity and truth.

Writing to gain control over powerless teaching situations.

The participants wrote about situations in which they felt powerless. For example, Charlie wrote about her students' difficulties with writing. She had asked for her students to free-write about any topic, at any page length; this was difficult for her students. Charlie explained,

> As I try to investigate further and better understand the problem [with their writing], I find out they are having trouble coming up with ideas to write about. To help ease the pressure, I have begun to give them some topics. They now have the option to write about their favorite family member or the most horrible meal their mother has ever cooked, or they can write whatever is on their mind[s].

Charlie also wrote about her busy teaching day which was an immense source of stress:

> I arrived at school at 7:25am. I quickly got my schedule and objectives on the board. It looked as if one of my own fifth graders [had] scribbled [down] subjects and times. Feeling rushed, I tried to ignore the feeling of "What if

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my vice principal walks in and docks me for messy writing on the board?"

Next, I try to begin creating my lesson for math. With only three problems written down, my mind begins to wonder as I gaze over the stacks of papers on my desk. It is now 7:43. I rush downstairs, trying not stumble off of a step and falling on my face like before.

She continued,

...I felt like I was having an anxiety attack on Monday. This occurs rarely for me. It was the day after break, and I didn't feel prepared. The idea of [any] of the frequent school observers coming into my classroom got me into a funk. They say it is only to give feedback or helpful suggestions. Do they understand how uneasy that makes most teachers? Flying into the classroom with a note pad with requirements to check, makes it known that *they* don't truly trust us. I wonder if they think they can fulfill our shoes more successfully. Yes, they were once teachers in their own classroom. They got out of it. Why? Could they not take the heat and begin thinking of other careers in education just like myself?

Charlie vented her frustrations over her stressful teaching job in her writing. She freely shared her writing with the group, referring to it as therapy for her stressful teaching day.

Additionally, Charlie shared her sadness over a student who had left mid semester so that her parents could return to work in Mexico:

Esperanza, one of my most quickly progressing students, withdrew from my class this week. This shouldn't have been shocking for me. As we walked

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out of our noisy, crowded hallway after the bell rung on Friday, it was clear

she needed to talk to me. All my students went towards the gate in a

clumped and deformed fifth grade line, and then went there separate ways.

Esperanza walked slowly behind the rest of the group and waited until I

caught up to her. Being new to the English language, she spoke very softly

and slowly. As she told me she was leaving...She was going back to Mexico.

I demanded a reason why...I could see the dimples beginning to form on her

chin and it begin to quiver slightly. Despite my own personal need to want

to know more about what was going on in her personal life, I moved on.

With a smile, I told her how much I would miss her and how proud I am for

all her hard work. This was all true, but my smile was fake. I was so angry.

How could she leave after she had come so far? Where would you be going

to school in Mexico? Will she continue learning in both languages?

...When Monday came, there was once less student in my line

waiting to begin our day. My heart sank. The day went on as always, but I

was so down knowing a member of our class would not be returning...What

happens to these kids that get the basics of English and then are sent back? I

know Esperanza is not the first student to take her education in the United

States seriously and become successful in it, yet have to leave in such a

short period of time.

Charlie could not control who stayed in her classroom and who left, so writing

about these situations allowed for her to contend with this powerlessness. It was

clear that she needed to record her anger because she had worked diligently with

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Esperanza to help her improve her skills only to lose her because of her parents' financial needs. Charlie would most likely never see this student again; she would have no way of contacting Esperanza and would never know if she was successful later. This left Charlie with a personal and professional void. She was angry, confused and disheartened over this experience, which she had lived with many times as a teacher in a low- income, urban school district near the Mexican border.

Katelyn also wrote to convey situations in her school in which she felt powerless. Her tone was sarcastic as she outlined her chapter ideas. The following excerpt is outlined as Katlyn had written it in her journal:

- "Wait, what page are we on?" Stupid Student Questions.
- "How are you a functioning member of society?" Teacher

Backgrounds

- "One Up!" The Power of Personal Trauma
- "She looks like Skeletor; he's in rehab." Administration
- "I F*ing Hate my Seventh Graders!" Lunch (Best part of the Day)
- "We know you are back East, smiling down" Teacher Skills
- "You make me want to kill myself." Ridiculous Students
- "You think we can meet up at Starbucks, on Sunday?" Parents (creeps)
- "Who Would You Rather?" Teacher Hookups (real and disgustingly fake) Sexual harassment at its finest & Gay or Straight?
- "So, Happy Hour?" Why teachers drink so much
- "Special Bathroom" Code Talk (Grenise)

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- Dreams/Inappropriate Conversations

- Carpool Talk

- Seven Purple/ Team Meetings

- School Creeps! (Randy, Jonny Beck, Carter, Det. Starbucks)

- Can you escape from Hell? Job search elsewhere

- "You're getting sub pay?" Teacher mistakes

- "What? They IMPROVED?" Teacher Greatness

- Positive Embarrassment Teacher Bullying/ Being Hilarious

- Conferences

- Staff meetings (inappropriateness)

- Break up of seven purple [team-teachers]

- Horrible Substitutes

- Economic Crisis, Budget Cuts, Closure

- Teacher Prep and am/pm duty: FTS!

- "Discipline" at School: pencil stabbings,

- Prey (New teachers and replacements)

- Reflections/ Confessional (ala Real World Style)

- Arguments: Whoever is the loudest wins

- ELL/Sp. ED. FML

- Facebook + Teaching = TROUBLE!

Katelyn wrote a second chapter, which contained character sketches about her closest teaching colleagues. She wrote "How are you [teachers] functioning members of society?" She prefaced these vignettes with the following:

Teachers are normal. Or at least that is the perceived notion. This may

come as a shock, brace yourself... we are lunatics. Who else but a crazy

person would do this job? Crazy parents, rude/disrespectful students, no

support from administration, technology failures, standardized testing, no

bonus, and this is just the tip of the iceberg! In order to get a real account of

the people teaching your children, here is a little window into several

teachers' worlds...

She described troubled teachers who felt powerless over their personal and

professional lives. One teacher had a drunk driving incident in which she had

crashed into a fence. She had a one night affair with a man, was arrested, and then

showed up to school on Monday morning.

Another teacher was described as having *daddy issues.* She moved from a small

Chicago suburb to ASU and became *a sorostitute*. This pun conveyed Katlyn's

sarcasm about her promiscuous colleague.

Katlyn's third chapter described her principal, whom she named *Skeletor*

because of the Diet Coke she constantly drank despite her anorexic physique.

Teachers made fun of this principal for the grammatical mistakes that she made in

her campus-wide PA announcements:

"The Emaciation Proclamation." Oh really? President Lincoln gave a speech

about starving men, women, and children? "We have a myrad of teacher

experience." Yeah, that was supposed to be myriad. My personal favorite,

"meld." Now, to her credit, she did use this word correctly. Many staff

members thought she meant to use the word melt, which would work well to

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describe the blending of teachers that came to our school when another middle school in our district closed. We did "melt" together into one staff. Katelyn also wrote about her vice principal:

> [He is] the worst assistant principal in the history of assistant principals. The word *principal* should never be said in the same sentence with that name, unless of course it is meant like what was previously stated. WORST EVER. To be fair, however, he was really well practiced at the art of being a horrendous administrator.

She explained that her vice principal had been addicted to pain pills and was formerly in charge of the detention room at her school. To her knowledge, he had not ever taught secondary students even though he was in charge of the middle school. Katlyn and her colleagues remained frustrated because they had to complete many of the jobs that he did not.

As an English teacher, who was constantly under pressure to help her students perform well on grammar and writing tests, Katlyn was frustrated by the uneducated administrators who were supposed to lead the school. She had to take directions from her principal and vice principal, but she could not respect them because of their lack of professionalism. In this capacity, Katelyn was powerless and used satire to escape her difficult school predicaments. However, her writing tone began to change during session 9. She wanted her chapters to end seriously so that her audience would feel compelled to question the problems in K-12 education. This was different from earlier sessions in which she described her writing as *humorous* and *silly*. During session 3 she wrote, "I love to write maybe I just need

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to take it more seriously. But how? When do I have the time [to write]?" By session 9, Katelyn had taken feedback from the group and incorporated serious paragraphs into her satire. She continued to write for therapy. Making fun of difficult situations helped her get through them.

Natasha also wrote about powerless situations, but unlike Katelyn and Charlie, she felt like she had some control over the events that she wrote about. This cohered with Natasha's confidence in her teaching and writing. Natasha wrote,

> I formed a bond with Kevin that year because the moment I met him, I developed my top strategy: I was going to become Kevin's best friend, his number one fan, and biggest cheer leader. I was going to be on Kevin's side, working with him, rather than against him, so that I would survive my first year of teaching, and the rest of my class could also learn in the process. It might seem obvious for a teacher to want to help a student, but most other teachers had written Kevin off at this point, because he was simply too difficult to handle. Those that were able to handle him behaviorally did not expect much from him academically. I was going to show Kevin that he could succeed.

Natasha believed that she could make a difference in her students' lives. She used writing to vent her frustrations over powerless situations and to describe how she had overcome difficult situations at her school. This differed from Charlie and Katelyn who wrote and discussed their frustrations about their schools, but did not pose any solutions to them. These findings suggest that teachers feel more confident as writers when they feel confident as educators.

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Writing connected the group.

All of the teachers connected to each others' stories. When Charlie wrote about the difficulties that her students had in completing their writing logs, Charlie and Natasha jumped in and shared similar experiences. The teachers made meaning of each others' conversations and shared their teaching histories, building on their writing from each others' experiences.

When Katelyn read her sarcastic journal entries, Charlie and Natasha laughed to the point of tears, sharing similar experiences that they had with *crazy colleagues* or ineffective administrators. These problematic situations allowed for the group to connect to one another because they discovered that their school experiences were not unique, and that they were not alone in their predicaments. Charlie and Katelyn empathized with Natasha when she shared her first classroom with them, which was a closet with no school supplies. They said that they could *picture Kevin* when Natasha wrote about his sadness and his anger. These shared experiences were the tools that bound the community members to one another (Wenger, 1998). Katelyn and Natasha related to Charlie's fears over being punished for teaching the wrong way, and being stressed out over the many different tasks that she performed daily. Each participant had established a role for themselves as writers and teachers. By the end of the community, all of the teachers felt like they had the tools to continue writing. Natasha was ready to share her writing with others at academic conferences while Charlie and Katelyn, who initially did not perceive themselves as writers, said they would want to share their writing more in the future after they had continued to polish their manuscripts.

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Communities

    The writing community is an open space.

Participants were compelled to share their most tenuous situations with one another because they felt safe in the writing community. We met at one of the participants' homes, a neutral zone which was free from school employees, colleagues, students, and other people or entities that would make the participants become fearful of sharing their stories. The teachers shared their school secrets around a table covered with graham crackers, juice, and grapes; the environment was relaxed and inviting. Conversations would occasionally diverge into plans for the weekend, weddings, parties, and holiday celebrations. In this way, the writing community was a place of truth. It allowed for the teachers to share their *whole selves* (Palmer, 1998). There were no dual identities constructed because teachers were free to discuss their personal and professional lives truthfully in connection with one another. The community's comfortable atmosphere allowed for participants to feel free enough to write and speak honestly and openly about their teaching situations. Participants retained different writing identities. For example, Natasha classified herself as a social justice writer early in the group. Katelyn preferred to write satirical narratives about her teaching and Charlie wrote about personal stories regarding her ELD students. Wenger (1998) describes this individuality:

> Each participant in a community of practice finds a unique place and gains a
> unique identity, which is both further integrated and further defined in the
> course of engagement in the practice. These identities become interlocked

and articulated with one another through mutual engagement, but they do

not fuse. (p. 76)

So although teachers shared their stories openly, and related to one another

through similar teaching experiences, they did not feel the need to conform to one

another. Without this relaxed, open writing environment, the teachers would not

have been able to share authentic stories about their teaching and writing. In this

way, the teachers' stories were *indigenous enterprises* that developed "in larger

contexts—historical, cultural, institutional--" (Wenger, 1998, p. 79). The writing

community differed greatly from their school communities which were oppressive,

restrictive, and required teachers to conform to specific professional development

activities.

School communities as closed spaces.

Teachers viewed their schools as oppressive and disconnected from their

students and the outside world. All participants agreed that collegiality with

administrators and teachers was important but this was more often than not non-

existent. Charlie was friends with her fifth grade team, but was concerned about a

colleague who tried to compete with her, and demanded that she accomplish tasks

quickly which made her stress out about her teaching. Katelyn was once quite close

to her eighth grade team, but the majority of those teachers had left her school. With

an additional class added onto her schedule, she had little time to meet with her

colleagues and worked alone. Both Charlie and Katelyn explained that when they

were afforded the time to work with their Personal Learning Communities they

were told to share their students' work, and plan together. Contradictory to this goal,

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their administrative teams required them to complete paperwork that had little to do with their classrooms and helping their students. As a result, the teachers had to discuss standardized tests rather than topics they believed were more beneficial for their students, including curriculum, student behaviors, and successful lessons. In this way, the title of Personal Learning Community (PLC) was deceptive; it connoted a place where teachers were afforded choice in their discussion and professional learning, a space in which people were working together toward a collective goal. In reality the teachers were completing mundane tasks that had little to no connection with their students or their teaching. This angered them and made them resent their PLC time. There was one occasion when Charlie was permitted to write in her PLC. Because of Charlie's district mandated personal narrative she was told to write a sample narrative for her students. Teachers were not given the time to share their narratives or discuss them.

When participants were asked to mention a community that they enjoyed, Charlie described her running team, Katelyn described a community center in which she worked and her college peers, and Natasha told us about a band that she had joined. They described their schools as being the complete opposite of these inviting communities because their PLCs were constructed by administrators, and enforced in a top-down manner that did not value their beliefs and ideologies. Teachers were pitted against their colleagues by using strategies including posting teacher test scores, sending teachers' punitive letters, and labeling teachers according to color codes that dictated whether they were poor, average or excellent instructors. This study suggests that for school communities to be valuable for

teachers they must honor their goals and beliefs and afford teachers the freedom to discuss topics that are meaningful to their classrooms.

Katelyn stated that her school had done away with learning communities, and given each teacher an extra class to instruct, because of the large number of students enrolled and the restrictive school budget. What is the affect of *false* communities? It is unhealthy that the participants' school leaders told them that they could work in communities where they had a voice, and then, maintained an environment that was uninviting and non-communal.

Natasha explained that the middle school teachers at her kindergarten to eighth grade school were ostracized by the elementary teachers. At faculty meetings she and her colleagues sat away from the rest of the school, and did not feel welcomed by the rest of the staff. She said that most days she lesson plans by herself, *I prefer it this way.* Natasha felt that if she worked with others she might have to conform to their teaching practices which she believed were detrimental to students, particularly special education students who struggled with learning. This made it difficult for Natasha to share her teaching ideas with her colleagues, who might have benefitted from her resources and, in turn, shared lessons with Natasha.

All of the participants thought that a writing community would be beneficial at their schools but due to time constraints, and a lack of trust with some of their colleagues, were uncertain if it was feasible.

Classrooms are compartmentalized sanctuaries.

Natasha and Katelyn both taught students in classrooms that were not initially designed for instruction. They had to transform these areas into learning spaces.

The hard work of scrubbing the walls and ceilings, painting, and acquiring supplies to make the room comfortable for their students was a transformative process that changed the way they viewed their teaching. Both of them had to become resourceful so that their rooms would be suitable for their students. In this way, they became student advocates. Once these rooms were completed, they were different from the rooms in the rest of their schools. Katelyn made her classroom more interactive, taking administrative required artifacts, like teacher word walls, and asking her students to add the vocabulary to the word wall.

Natasha repeatedly compared her classroom to her colleagues'. She explained that her room was more personal than theirs with student pictures and work posted, unlike the other teachers' rooms that often had bare walls and non-personal items. In this way, her room was a metaphor for her teaching, which she believed, was more inviting for her special education students and welcomed their unique personalities.

Charlie's room was organized, tidy and colorful. She was the only teacher who described student behavior as connected to her classroom in that she was adamant that her students remain behaved and on task at all times. So for Charlie, her room was a fun, safe space where learning *had* to take place. Like Natasha, she explained that her classroom was different from other teachers' rooms. However, rather than describing her room as inviting like Natasha, Charlie emphasized that a tidy room made for well behaved students.

Administrators seldom ventured into any of the participants' rooms. If they did, the tone of the class room changed. For example, Charlie felt intimidated when administrators came in to evaluate her; she was afraid that her teaching would not

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align specifically with the district mandated curriculum, and did not want to receive a low evaluation and ultimately, be labeled a *red teacher*. Katelyn explained that although she was required to hand in weekly lesson plans for her, five preparations, last year, she rarely sent them in because of time constraints. She once received a casual e-mail reminder from her English team leader asking for the lessons, but for the most part, Katelyn was left alone. If an administrator came into her room she was pressured to change her lesson to fit their curricular expectations.

Natasha continued to teach her students in the way that she deemed most appropriate. No one bothered her about her instruction because she taught the students that the rest of the school had given up on instructing. These classrooms were compartmentalized; this isolation made it difficult to establish a community with colleagues and administrators. This island effect made the teachers feel alone, covert, and undervalued.

Dictatorial administrators.

Within a community the most important component are its members. If a group of people is honest, open and truthful, and value each others' stories, both positive and negative, its members feel valued, respected, and appreciated. This makes for a non-hostile working environment. In this way, a positive community can function productively for both the collective group and its individual members (Wenger, 1998). If a community's members know that they will be judged negatively for having a difference in opinion from the rest of the group, they will construct barriers over sharing their stories with the group, and remain isolated within that community. This held true for the participants. They saw their school leaders as

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under-qualified individuals who had power over their jobs, curriculum, and students. Often the participants' administrators had omnipotent roles but had not earned them. For example, Katelyn was frustrated that she had a principal who was a former physical education teacher who controlled academic affairs, and told her and her colleagues how to teach language arts, science, and reading. She also resented that the vice principal had instructed kindergarten for one year and had spent the majority of his time as a behavior monitor in the detention room. She could not respect her administrators for this reason, and resented their positions that she believed, had been gained politically through favoritism at the district office.

Unlike Katelyn, Charlie respected some of her school officials. Charlie admired her mentor teacher. This teacher had recently left and Charlie had acquired her position. This mentor followed her own strategies for teaching and ignored the district's instructional techniques. Charlie admired her mentor for this reason and wanted to be more like her, but feared getting into trouble if she strayed from what her administrators had mandated. Charlie liked her current fifth grade lead teacher but felt pressured to comply with district requests which were dictated to her by this individual. The teachers were interested in sharing their writing at academic conferences. They explained that their districts had never told them about these conferences; they first learned about them through our writing community. This suggests that administrators and school districts may serve as gatekeepers who lock out teachers from meaningful professional development.

Natasha did not mention her administrators in detail. She described a colleague whom she taught next door to for one year, who would call her special education

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students *stupid* and yell at them. Natasha became angry when describing this teacher and argued that she would quit the day she handed worksheets to students and yelled at them from her desk. In this way, Natasha was her own school leader; she worked alone and made her own directives. It was this autonomy from the rest of the teachers and administrators that kept her working at that school. Natasha was worried about how long she could keep achieving high standards with her students because of the lack of resources and support at her school, and her physical exhaustion.

All participants were anxious when they were at their schools. Research purports that teachers should write to learn more about their teaching, students, and instruction (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Duckworth, 1987; Fleischer, 1994; Hollingsworth & Sockett,1994; Mohr, 2004, et. al; Paley, 1999). However, is it possible to write in closed communities? Even if the schools in this study afforded teachers the time and space in which to write, it is certain that teachers would not feel comfortable writing honestly about their students and instruction, because they would fear being punished for their mistakes, or getting in trouble for straying from their schools' standards of teaching and learning. This study suggests that without a supportive community in which all members are equal and valued, teachers will not be empowered to write. Teachers need to know that their instructional practices are valued and appreciated before they can write about their classrooms meaningfully and truthfully. These findings suggest that administrators should write honestly and openly with their teachers and examine their own beliefs about instruction. In this way, administrators would function as coaches who support their teachers and pose

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questions about instruction rather than dictating demands. The ideal school community is one where the word *administrator* is eradicated, where administrators, teachers and support staff work on a level playing field that affords them opportunities to teach, learn, and write together all under the term of *educator*.

Exceptional mentors.

Both Charlie and Natasha had mentors whom they valued in their first years of teaching. Charlie looked to her mentor as a source of emotional and professional support. She planned with her during her first three years of instruction and often borrowed her mentor's lesson plans which worked well with her own students. Charlie admired how her mentor taught lessons that she thought suited her individual students' needs and abilities rather than how the district mandated that she should teach. Charlie explained that her mentor left school right after the bell rang, and still generated creative, innovative lessons that her students enjoyed. Charlie wanted to be like this mentor who had avoided burnout despite over 20 years in the classroom:

> It still amazes me how [my mentor] could walk in 15 minutes before class and leave 30 minutes after class, yet have her day run smoothly and have engaged students. Maybe it is her experience, but maybe not. I don't remember her using any of the techniques our district has told us they would like to see us using. She didn't and she is still teaching today. When teachers aim to emulate the methods and techniques by others, they might get burned...It's like we, including myself, are running from one thing to the next to see what works.

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Charlie was more isolated since her mentor had left last May, and she had begun

teaching her mentor's classes.

Although Natasha planned by herself for the majority of her instruction, during

her first year of teaching, like Charlie, she had a supportive mentor. Natasha

described this mentor in her manuscript:

There was one teacher in particular, who although she had been working in

the same district for close to thirty years, maintained an energetic and

vibrant attitude towards teaching. I was lucky enough to have Darlene

Mayhurst as my mentor during my first year. She had started out teaching

special education during what she referred to as the "Dark Ages" when all

special education students were taught in self contained, portable

classrooms, physically removed from the school, regardless of how

moderate their disabilities might be. She then taught fourth grade general

education for several years, before returning to teach in the resource

classroom for grades four through [six,] which was where she began the

year that I arrived. Ms. Mayhurst stopped by room every morning and

afternoon to find out how things were going. She frequently brought me

'gifts,' which ranged from pre-made student packets for the holidays to

snacks. One day she came by with a giant umbrella because she had noticed

how overheated I became while serving recess duty in the beating [...] sun.

She sat and talked with me about student issues, helped me trouble-shoot

and problem-solve, and offered me encouragement and advice on a daily

basis. She sympathized for me, stood up for me, and helped me deal with

many difficult situations, with students who would not comply with rules and expectations to teachers who would not comply with the law and provide accommodations. She seemed constantly amazed at how much I was willing to put into my classroom and how far I would go to ensure my students' success. She helped me to see that what I was doing was not in vain, and that from the perspective of a veteran teacher, I was doing great things.

Darlene served as Natasha's advocate early in her teaching. This may have helped Natasha advocate for her special education students. In this way, Natasha was paying forward the kindness that Darlene had showed her toward her own students.

If not for Natasha's positive relationship with Darlene, she might not have remained a teacher. Natasha wrote,

I had been instructed, by Teach for America, that I should maintain an attitude of "respect and humility" for the people who worked at my school. This seemed condescending once I actually began teaching. The idea of "respect and humility" implied that I should not act like I knew more than those around me, although I probably did. When I started, I found that I approached teaching with a great deal of enthusiasm that others had since lost. However, there was also a certain amount of experience working in this particular community, in this specific school, that could not be minimized. [Darlene and I] were helping each other through teaching in a special education classroom. It was not a sense of humility that I was

striving to adopt so much as a being humbled by this entire first year of teaching in general.

Katelyn said that one of her high school English teachers inspired her to become a teacher. She named another group as mentors, her former colleagues, the seven Purple Team, whom she admired and had formed strong relationships with. Katelyn had lost touch with her English teacher and the seven Purple Team had moved away from her school in May of 2010. Katelyn's lack of support at her school may explain her sarcasm as a writer.

Connections to the Literature

This study was guided by Wenger's (1998) communities of practice theory. This theory allows for knowledge to be examined together, socially as learners work together toward a common goal (Wells, 2000). In this study, teachers shared the commonality of exploring their identities as teachers and as writers through their journals and manuscripts. Studies on identity cohere with sociocultural theory in that teachers' identities were shaped and continuously renegotiated through their social interactions with their colleagues in their writing sessions. This study examined communities of practice theory in connection with three novice, Title I English teachers' identities as educators and as writers. The goal of this study was to uncover concrete examples of the affects of a writing community on educators' teaching and writing identities.

Communities of practice theory.

Deborah Bieler and Anne Burns Thomas (2009), and Tom Williams (1990) explored writing communities in their studies. Catherine Patterson and Alma Fleet

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(1996-1997) extended this work when they led a writing group with novice and veteran teachers in early childhood education. Neither of these writing communities exclusively explored teacher and writer identity with secondary educators who worked in low-income schools. Most prominently, Ann Whitney (2006) explored teacher transformation after a NWP institute. Her findings suggest that teachers are stronger instructors of writing after they participate in NWP workshops. Within this field of research; however, few studies explored the affect of writing communities on teachers' identities as educators and writers who have completed NWP institutes. The literature focuses on writing being a social process, one in which writing group members can share their writing and help each other draft their manuscripts. It does not examine if English teachers believe that they are writers during and after their writing group experiences. In my findings, I discovered that the NWP fellows in my writing group did not feel like they were writers after their institute without an audience who was interested in reading their writing. They did not have the time to write because of their teaching obligations with grading, lesson planning, and meetings. However, the writing community felt connected to their writing once they began meeting as they were afforded the time to write, the freedom to write what they wished, and were encouraged to keep writing by their community members.

Amanda Gulla (2007) argues that if students are expected to develop voice and fluency in their writing, their teachers must practice the same tasks. In a course called Writing, Reading and Teaching Poetry, which is part of the master's degree program in English Education at Lehman College/CUNY, teachers learn strategies for teaching and responding to writing in their secondary schools. Gulla advocates

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for using creative writing to help instructors develop their voices and identities. In our writing community, participants developed their voices as they wrote together. For example, Katelyn developed a satirical voice in which she made fun of serious situations at her school; whereas, Natasha renewed her social activist writing voice that she had gained through her childhood experiences with her brothers. Charlie continued to experiment with her writing and discovered her difficulties attaining perfectionism as an educator and a writer. The participants also developed preferred genres of writing. Katelyn and Charlie liked writing stories about their schools and students; whereas, Natasha preferred writing essays. All three participants wanted to write about their classrooms to vent their frustrations over their schools and explore their identities further.

More literature is needed to explore the intersection between writing instruction and authorship. If research can explore these two domains, and encourages language arts teachers to write personally and professionally, teachers may feel more confident in their writing. This writing can be completed for a variety of different audiences including teachers' colleagues, administrators, school districts, and political officials. This writing affords teachers a voice in the decisions that affect them and their students on civic, national, and global levels, because their writing can be published and read by a variety of people in education. In this way, K-12 teachers may have more power over financial and curricular decisions that are often made at the federal level without their discretion. For example, when teachers write about a difficulty in their classroom, such as a lack of supplies as Katelyn and Natasha described with their first classrooms, they may receive funding from

businesses and draw the attention of community members and families, who may not have known about this situation. If teachers publish their writing in academic journals they will have a wide audience of readers who may learn about their concerns including administrators, professors, and teachers in other states and countries. This allows for teachers' views to be heard by a larger audience than their colleagues. The National Council for Teachers of English encourages K-12 educators to write about their classrooms and share their findings at academic conferences to change political issues such as educational budgets and curricular choices that are often mandated at the federal level.

Findings from this study connect with communities of practice theory and expand the field of teachers-as-writers research. For example, by applying communities of practice theory, I have honored participants' beliefs individually and collectively because the teachers wrote their feelings solitarily in their journals, and then initiated a discussion centered on this writing. I studied the nuances of participants' teaching and writing, and collapsed and connected themes that were common among the writing group members. This allowed for a close examination of each participant in the group and for me to comparatively analyze my data on the three participants. This is consistent with communities of practice theory, which values the input of all group members both individually and collaboratively (Wenger, Mc-Dermott, & Synder, 2002; Wenger & Snyder, 2000).

Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, set of problems and/or passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge by interacting regularly (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Community members

have a shared understanding of what they are doing and what their tasks mean to them individually and collectively because they often share common goals or activities in which they are mutually engaged. In this study, participants found commonalities in the frustrations that they had experienced and shared over increased class sizes, lack of resources, poor pay, and menial tasks that detracted their attention from their students. These negative experiences solidified the group. By session three, after the community members had become more familiar with each other and accustomed to sharing their writing with one another, it was clear that writing in and of itself was not connecting the group, rather, teacher's shared experiences and stories solidified the group. This is what Wenger (1998) refers to *as engagement in the world* that binds collective communities. These experiences allowed participants to feel validated because their group members had experienced the same situations that they had experienced (Lave, 1991; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Wenger, 1998). The group felt more validated than they had before the writing community because their experiences allowed for them to construct a unified network of teacher-writers (Lave & Wenger, 2001). Sometimes, the teachers were concerned about what their colleagues would say if they spoke against school policies because they did not want teachers to tell their school administrators about their complaints. Because the writing community was removed from the participants' schools, they were comfortable speaking about difficulties on their campuses. They also felt at ease sharing their writing even if they were under-confident in their writing abilities.

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Wenger's *modes of belonging* has been a valuable resource in examining the writing community. Participants constructed a connectedness to one another in the writing group. The first mode of belonging, *engagement,* is a combination of ongoing negotiations of meaning, forming of trajectories and unfolding one's histories of practice (Wenger, 1998, pp. 174-175). By the fourth session of the writing community, participants had become engaged with each others' experiences. The group began to construct identities within the community. Charlie was the perfectionist, who strove so inspire the best work in her ELD students. Katelyn was the satirist, who took sad frustrating situations and made them humorous. Her perceptions of herself as an instructor and a writer fluctuated between being a happy teacher and a teacher and a writer who felt like she had no identity. For example, on some days Katelyn believed that she made little to no affect upon her students' learning and that she had no audience who would want to read her writing. Other days, Katelyn felt confident that her teaching had improved and that she wrote humorous stories. Natasha was the social activist who wrote to combat the bureaucracy of the educational system to empower her ELL students. I was the confidence-builder in the group. Whenever Katelyn or Charlie felt under-confident in their writing abilities, I told them to keep going; they were writers who were capable of achieving as much on the page as they had in the classroom. As a group, we preserved our free, fluid identities. This coheres with Wenger's (1998) narrowness of *engagement.* Communities of practice may encourage participants to construct identities that are constrained, and entrap participants in identities that do not always represent the real self (p. 175). In this way, I remained cautious while

observing the group, keeping alert for any changes in their writing and discussions. Participants were encouraged to discuss and write about what they wished so that they could retain freedom and autonomy and so that they could explore authentic identities.

Imagination is the second *mode of belonging* that Wenger describes. It is "the process of expanding our self by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves" (Wenger, 1998, p. 176). In this way, the teachers in the writing community were comfortable exploring their identities. Katelyn and Charlie, in particular, explored new perceptions of themselves—the idea that they were writers. Wenger cautions that *imagination* can concoct a stereotypical image of one's character. Teachers alleviated such stereotypes by sharing their nuanced stories each time we met. Initially, all of the participants felt under-confident in imagining themselves as writers. Although Natasha saw herself as an activist, it was not until session 9 that she called herself a writer, and acknowledged that her insecurities kept her from writing. Katelyn went from writing a few pages in the first community sessions, to writing four chapters of a book that she began co-authoring on Googledocs. She shared her writing with the group that led her to envision herself as a writer, and put her stories out for the public to see. From there, she began conceptualizing the problems she would face as a teacher when her book was put into print. She imagined herself as a writer. Before the writing community she explained that she had no writing identity because she did not write.

Charlie imagined herself as an emerging writer. Although she remained

reluctant to share her writing, she always read it to the group. She continued to

compare herself to the other group members, thinking that their writing was

polished and that hers was a list of rambling thoughts. However, she showed an

interest in completing her manuscript once the group suggested that she write it as a

response to Jonathan Kozol's book, *Letters to a Teacher.* The mutual engagement

that the group shared with their writing allowed for them to imagine and newly

align themselves as writers. Wenger (1998) calls this *exploration:*

> Educational imagination is also about not accepting things they way they
>
> are, about experimenting and exploring possibilities, reinventing the self and
>
> in the process, reinventing the world. It is daring to try on something really
>
> different, to open new trajectories….In this sense, it is about identity as a
>
> creation. (p. 273)

Alignment "bridges time and space to form broader enterprises so that

participants become connected through the coordination of their energies, actions,

and practices" (Wenger 1998, p. 179). Although *alignment* amplifies a group's

actions in a way that one's solitary actions do not, it can make individuals feel

coerced or threatened by a group, limiting their individuality, particularly when

one's views conflict with the rest of the group's. Participants did not feel the need to

align their writing or their teaching identities with one another. The community

consisted of participants who were from different school districts. This allowed for

teachers to feel comfortable sharing their stories in the sessions and made it easier

for the community to remain truthful. After the group became more familiar with

one another, and realized that they shared similar concerns about teaching and writing, they were more empowered to be open with each other.

Participants retained individual writing ideas. For example, Charlie wrote teaching vignettes connected to difficulties during her school day. Katelyn continued to write a satirical book that brought humor to difficult situations that she had experienced within her school. Natasha wrote one essay that analyzed her challenges as a special education teacher in a Title I, multi-ethnic K-12 school. Katelyn composed sketches of chapters for a satirical book on *crazy stories* about the colleagues and administrators who worked in her school. Participants did not feel pressured into writing like other group members because everyone's stories were honored and appreciated, no matter how different or unusual they were. This allowed for participants to explore a variety of writing genres and topics. Also, there was no specific writing goal initiated for the group; my goal was their goal, so members did not feel pressured to complete a specific task for me or each other.

Natasha shared some anxiety about the group judging her as a *goody two-shoes* because her writing was connected to advocating for special education students, particularly since Katelyn had written satirically about this population. However, she acknowledged that she trusted the group and was therefore able to share *heartfelt* narratives with them. Charlie also said that she was honest with the group, but wanted to make certain that she was polite about issues regarding special education since Natasha taught that population. As Charlie explained, "That is part of a community, showing respect and knowing the boundaries of the community."

Katelyn was the only participant who said that she never *held back* what she shared with her teaching or writing.

Implications for English Education

This study has multiple implications for the field of English education. For example, it examines the rewards, challenges, and possibilities of National Writing Project fellows writing after an NWP summer institute. It also reaffirms that despite NWP's support during summer institutes, during the school year teachers need additional support and time for their writing if they are going to become life-long writers. In this study, teachers stopped writing after the summer institute because of time constraints. With budget cuts, NWP had cut many of their programs, this trickled into our writing project, which provided one post-institute writing opportunity to its participants. It would have been beneficial for the project to continue meeting in order for NWP participants to feel supported and continue writing.

This study also highlights the importance of examining ELA teachers' college preparation. Because Natasha is not an education major and is the only participant who feels confident in her writing abilities, which she connected to her experience in writing and presenting her master's thesis, this study suggests that teacher education programs support preservice English teachers writing in their preparation programs. Universities and teaching colleges should foster the identities of both *instructor* and *writer* in novice ELA instructors so that they become more confident and successful in their writing instruction and compositions. How can teachers

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educate their students on how to write if they do not feel confident about their own writing?

Additionally, more college professors can use writing as a vehicle for novice teachers to explore their teaching, and aid in constructing their identities as language arts instructors. Many teachers leave their preservice education following the plans of their mentor teachers without knowing how their personality might connect in their classrooms with their students. It would be helpful for ELA teachers to write about their personal and professional experiences so that they can conceptualize the type of teachers they wish to become. ELA teachers should continue to write throughout their careers, as they develop their practice, so they can stay in touch with their philosophies of teaching and learning. This writing is powerful because it allows for teachers to become life long learners with their students.

Another implication for the field of English education that is generated from this study is the importance of writing communities in the classroom. If ELA teachers have the opportunity to write and discuss their writing with other language arts teachers, they can use their writing in their classrooms to instruct their students on composition. ELA teachers can also implement the components of a writing community within their classrooms and foster a community in which students and teachers write together. This would allow for students to experience the benefits of writing with their teachers. One of the misconceptions that students have about their teachers is that they are perfect in their content area. When students see that their teachers also struggle with writing they may become more confident with writing

their words on the page. In this way, writing is more authentic for the student and the teacher.

Implications for Education

There are also implications for the field of education in general. It is important that teachers reflect upon and explore their self perceptions as they change over time and are often renegotiated based on the schools in which they work. For example, all participants began to question their roles as educators and contemplate leaving their schools in search of communities that were more aligned with their teaching identities. They also re-negotiated their perceptions of themselves as writers. Charlie began to share her writing with confidence and give editorial feedback to the group, Natasha wanted to present her writing at conferences, and Katelyn began writing a book with a colleague through Googledocs.

This study also furthers research on teacher identity, within communities of practice, examining the rewards and challenges that emerge when teachers write together and share their writing. For example, Natasha felt somewhat isolated from the group when she wrote as an activist for her ELD students because the other two participants had not worked with learning disabled students. There are walls that exist between teachers because of the differently tracked classes that they instruct. Writing is a way of bridging teachers within the same discipline, with one another, who otherwise might not meet and converse.

Additionally, a writing community affords teachers the time to reflect upon their practices which are deeply rooted in their lived experiences. Teacher's personal experiences are rarely discussed in schools even though literature indicates that

teaching is a profession that is grounded in teachers' emotions and lived histories (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; van Veen & Sleegers, 2006; Zembylas, 2003, 2004). This study suggests that writing communities should become an integral part of K-12 schools' professional development that is woven into the regular school day, so that teachers can explore their personal and professional selves. For example, after the writing group, teachers shared, in the interviews, how their teaching and writing were connected to their personal experiences. Natasha discovered that her social activist teaching and writing was connected to her experiences with having two brothers with disabilities who received inadequate services. Her outrage at this fueled the passion she exuded for her teaching and writing. Charlie felt uncertain about her writing and believed she was more passive in the group, stemming from her experiences with having an older brother who was an over-achiever. This sibling dynamic also influenced her marriage, in which she allowed for her husband to make most of the decisions. Katelyn remained humorous in her writing and connected this to her experiences with a sister who was *self absorbed* and *serious.* Additionally, Katelyn's unique appearance with her red hair and freckles allowed for her to be shy, and helped her gravitate toward teaching middle school students who also feel awkward about their appearances. This suggests that teachers need the opportunity to reflect upon and share their personal and professional stories to learn more about themselves. In turn, educators can become more connected to their students, colleagues, and themselves.

During the writing community, there were many problems posed about the field of education in general. The participants voiced concerns about inadequate

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classrooms, lack of resources, a lack of curriculum for impoverished students, troubled students with few counseling resources, difficult colleagues and test-driven administrators. These are issues that can be further explored through the tool of a writing community, bringing additional voices into the conversation including administrators, janitors, cafeteria workers, librarians and secretaries. By writing about and reflecting upon problems in the field of education, and discussing these complexities with a wide range of personnel, solutions can be posed and implemented locally. Further, bringing these different groups of people together in one community can help bridge the gap that exists between some school administrators, teachers, and classified personnel. This might ultimately bridge the gap between college and non-college workers in education.

Recommended Future Research

More research is needed on novice teacher-writers who work in rural schools. This can provide information to teachers working with this demographic of students in these communities. Research can also explore how novice and veteran educators cohabitate in a writing community. The nuances that occur between these two groups of teachers can provide a wealth of knowledge on teacher development including teacher mentoring.

There is also knowledge lacking on how K-12 schools implement ELA professional development. All of the participants wrote about frustrations over their districts' mundane, worthless professional activities and wanted to know more about writing and presenting at academic conferences. For example, the teachers in the writing group did not know that the National Council for Teachers of English

existed. This suggests that school districts and administrators are lacking knowledge about this important organization or are poor at communicating information about it to their teachers. Future studies are needed on the affects of weak professional development on ELA instructors and their students, and how the divide between district and academia's professional development activities can be narrowed.

Additionally, more literature is needed on cross curricular writing groups in which educators from mathematics, social studies, science and language arts come together to draft their writing about their different school experiences and content areas. Also, as aforementioned, a writing group that includes administrators, teachers, and other school personnel including maintenance staff, librarians, and cafeteria workers would help bridge these diverse yet equally important positions. Perhaps a more holistic, inclusive portrait of education can be fostered if these different groups write together and share their stories in a community. This can foster communication through these compartmentalized groups that are so integral to K-12 schools.

Although writing researchers may posit that English teachers act as *gatekeepers* by withholding writing practices from their students (Early and DeCosta-Smith, 2011), this study suggests that English teachers may not have these writing skills because they do not write enough in their preparation and during the school day, and do not participate in a writing community. Findings indicate that some teacher education programs for ELA instructors and schools in which teachers work serve as *gatekeepers* that close doors to teachers pursuing their writing.

This study suggests that when preservice teachers are not afforded authentic writing opportunities, they graduate from their teacher education programs without confidence as writers. Once ELA teachers transition into their careers they are, again, not afforded the opportunity to write. In turn, it is difficult for them to teach writing to their students, particularly low-income, minority students who may need additional support from their teachers with composition. K-12 teachers need the time and space to write for themselves, on topics of their selection, during the school day, and then, must be trained on how to use their writing as a model to coach their students. This would provide students with *social capital* (Putnam, 2002; 2000*)* through authentic writing genres and skills that they would learn from their teachers. Students can later use these skills in college and in the workforce. Teachers can only provide their students with this capital when they possess this currency:

> …if one needs an identity of participation in order to learn, yet needs to learn in order to acquire an identity of participation, then there seems to be no way to start. Addressing this most fundamental paradox is what, in the last analysis, education is all about. (Wenger, 1998, p. 277)

Powerful writing instruction is achieved when teachers write for, about, and among themselves.

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APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

Figure A1

Participant Permission Form

_____
Permission Form
February 2011

The right to write: Novice English teachers write to explore their identities in a writing community

My name is Mary Powell. I am a graduate student in the English department at Arizona State University under the direction of Dr. Duane Roen, director of English education. I am working on my dissertation for this study. My research aims to answer the following:

What is the affect of a writing community on three language arts National Writer's Project fellows' perceptions of themselves as teachers and writers as revealed in their writing journals?

I am inviting your participation in a bi-monthly teacher writing group. The group will meet from August 2011-December 2011 for 90 minutes each session.

As part of this writing group you would agree to do the following:

- Complete a 15 item demographic profile on your teaching background.

- Write in a journal that I will provide for you. This includes writing for the first 20-25 minutes and the last 20-25 minutes of every session on prompts connected to how you perceive yourself as a teacher and a writer. Some of these prompts include why did you become an English teacher? What do you stand for as a teacher? How has teaching molded who you are? How have you molded your teaching to shape who you are? Other prompts may arise from our group's writing and conversations but will be similar in nature.

- Share your journals with the group as a way to explore your perceptions of yourselves as teachers and writers. I will take field notes during these meetings to record my observations.

- Complete an audio taped interview, at the end of the study, lasting no more than one hour in which you explain what you discovered as a result of reading over your teaching journal. If you do not wish to be recorded the researcher will take notes on your interview using pen and paper only.

Because discussions will be done in a group setting, complete confidentiality cannot be maintained. I will work to protect your confidentiality by removing your name from all written documents and assigning you a pseudonym. All written documents collected in the study will be kept in a locked file cabinet and will be shredded and discarded after we have examined the data. All audio recordings will be destroyed after the study is completed. All writing samples and responses will be anonymous and all copies of written work collected during the study will only be read by me and Dr. Duane. Roen.

You do not have to be in this study. No one will be mad at you if you decide not to participate in this study. Even if you start the study, you may choose to stop later if you want to without penalty. You may ask questions about the study at any time.

If you decide to be in the study, I will not tell anyone else how you respond or act as part of the study.

Signing here means that you have read this form, or have had it read to you and that you are willing to be in this study.

I agree to participate in this study_____

I agree to be audio recorded for the purposes of this research study_____

I do not wish to be recorded. Only written notes may be used to capture my interview_____

Subject's printed name _____

Signature of investigator_____

Date_____

Subject's printed name _____

Signature of investigator_____

Date_____

Figure A2

Survey Protocol: Teacher Demographics
_____
The right to write: Novice English teachers write to explore their identities in a writing community

Demographic Profile
Teaching background, educational history and school settings

1. Where did you do your professional preparation?
2. What drew you into the English teaching profession?
3. How long have you taught?
4. How long do you wish to continue teaching?
5. How long do you plan to stay at your current school?
6. Is this school population one what you wish to continue working with? Explain.
7. What is the percentage of free and reduced lunch on your school's campus?
8. What are the grade levels at your school?
9. What grades and courses do you teach?
10. Is this your first career? If not, what career did you have prior to teaching?
11. Did you write during your professional preparation? In what ways?
12. Describe your experiences with writing to me.
13. Tell me a story about you in regards to teaching and writing.
14. What is your impression of yourself as a teacher? A writer?
15. Is there anything additional I should know?

_____

Figure A3

Post Interview

_____

The right to write: Novice English teachers write to explore their identities in a writing community

Directions: Please read over your teaching journal and highlight some examples in it that you believe are most important. Next week, I would like to interview you for a maximum of one hour to find out what you discovered about yourself after reading your journal. You are free to share as little or as much as you wish during this interview.

What is your impression of yourself as a teacher?

What is your impression of yourself as a writer?

APPENDIX B

WRITING GROUP SCHEDULE

The right to write: Novice English teachers explore their identities in a writing community

Teachers may respond to these in any genre they wish including but not limited to prose, poetry or narrative format.

Session 1: The preliminaries of the writing community.

- I disseminate and participants sign permission forms.

- Share p. 98 Lynn Nilsen quote on writing from Marsha Harrison's (1999) dissertation.

- Discuss

- Let's journal about possible pieces you would like to write. We will work as a community to help each other with our writing and use our journals as a place to record our thoughts and ideas.

  1. What genres would you like to write? An article, story, poem, a book? I am here to provide you a place and space in which to write.

  2. What are you interested in writing about?

  3. Would you like to write a piece by yourself or as a group?

- Please journal your thoughts for the next 15 minutes.

- Share our journal entries.

- See the *English Journal*-tips to publish and call for manuscripts, *Arizona English Bulletin* online call, and other venues on my laptop from young adult literature courses. Would you like to write for publication and present at AETA and NCTE 2012?

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- Share future session information from Appendix B. Would you like to plan all meetings on your own? Use some of my ideas? You pick.

- Demographic profile completed by participants.

- See my article 10 steps to conducting research if you are interested in this topic.

Session 2: Defining community.

- Participants clarify their responses to questions 4-5 on the demographic profile.

- Define what you believe is a community. Please name some other communities that have mattered to you. What components did they have that made them a community? How are these communities the same or different from the schools in which you work? (write for 15 minutes)

- Share your journal responses with one another, discuss. (10 minutes)

- What kind of traits would you like to see in this community? (Five minute discussion)

- Share Livsey and Palmer's (1999) beliefs on communities. What are your thoughts? (Three-five minute discussion)

- Teachers type on laptops, working on their pieces. (25 minutes)

- Visit week 3. Is there anything you would like to do in there for next time or would you rather work on your writing the entire time? Circle anything under session 3 that you would be interested in doing. (Five minutes)

- Disseminated Shagoury-Hubbard and Miller-Power's (1993) book *The Art of Classroom Inquiry: A Handbook for Teacher-researchers* to the participants.

Session 3: Discovering the self.

- Journal: Who are you? Give some descriptors that qualify who you are. (Repeat this at the end of the group also).

- Discuss. Who did you identify yourself as?

- What is a metaphor that conceptualizes who you are as a teacher? What is a metaphor that conceptualizes who you are as a writer? How does this metaphor change as a result of being a part of a writing community? (Write for 20-25 minutes)

- Share your journal responses with one another, discuss (30 minutes)

- Journal: Who do you fear becoming as a teacher? Who do you fear becoming as a writer? (Write for 20-25 minutes)

- Discuss

For next week teachers will bring in a personal artifact (s) to share with the group that is a metaphor for their perceptions of themselves as a teacher and a personal artifact that is a metaphor for their perceptions of themselves as writers. These may be the same object. You may bring a family photo, piece of clothing from their child hood, anything you wish that represents you. Teachers will journal about their personal artifact: What objects did you bring? What do they signify about you? What do they signify about your perceptions about yourself as a teacher? What do they signify about your perceptions of yourself as a writer?

Session 4: Exploring ourselves through personal artifacts.

- Teachers will journal about their personal artifact: What objects did you bring? What do they signify about you? What do they signify about your perceptions of yourself as a teacher? What do they signify about your perceptions of yourself as a writer? (Write for 20 minutes)

- Share our journal responses with one another, discuss. (30 minutes)

- Revisit your objects, how does the object you brought in for teaching differ from that of writing? How are they similar? What do these artifacts say about your perceptions of yourself as a teacher? What do these artifacts say about your perceptions of yourself as a writer? (Write for 20-25 minutes)

- Share.

Session 5: Uncovering identity and integrity.

- Read pp. 9-13 in Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach.* What do you think about this except? Does it relate at all to your experiences as a teacher? A writer? (10 minutes)

- What does integrity mean in the context of teaching? What does integrity mean in the context of writing? (10 minute discussion).

- Share your journal responses with the group. Discuss and praise question and polish. (10 minutes)

- Praise, question and polish our pieces. (30-45 minutes)

- Planning the project for next time (Five minutes)

- Discuss

Session 6: Reconnecting the self.

- Read Parker Palmer's introduction in *The Courage to Teach* on unifying a teaching identity, pp. 9-13. (10 minutes)

- Write in your journals whatever comes into your mind after reading this excerpt. (10 minutes)

- Share your journal responses with one another, discuss (Five minutes)

- Writing our manuscripts (60 minutes)

- Summarize what you have written today for the group (Five minutes)

- Plan out meeting dates in November. (Five minutes)

Session 7: Exploring our classrooms and our writing.

- Describe your classroom to me. How does it fit into the context of your school? (15 minutes)

- Discussion on our classrooms (10 minutes)

- What is a writing task that you completed or did not complete that was important to you?

- How did this experience shape your perceptions of yourself? (We wrote this via e-mail)

- Write our manuscripts (50 minutes)

- Share our pieces (Five minutes)

Session 8: Exploring the heart.

- Share Parker Palmer's *heart mantra* and the four phases in a teacher's life: *teaching from the heart, losing heart, seeking to take heart,* and *giving heart* to students. Identify and explore the phases or phases that characterize your

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vocation at this moment (Livsey & Palmer,1999, p. 38). Additional

questions to explore include: Are you happy with the phase that you are in?

What does this say about you as a teacher? Does writing play a role in this

phase? Explain. (read and write for 20 minutes)

- Share your journal responses with one another, discuss (10 minutes)

- Write our manuscripts (60 minutes)

- Share what we have written (10 minutes)

For next week teachers will bring in a personal artifact (s) to share with the

group at the next session that is a metaphor for them as a teacher and a personal

artifact that is a metaphor for their perceptions of themselves as writers. These may

be the same object. You may bring a family photo, piece of clothing from their

child hood, anything you wish that represents you. Teachers will journal about their

personal artifact: What objects did you bring? What do they signify about you?

What do they signify about your perceptions about yourself as a teacher? What do

they signify about your perceptions about yourself as a writer?

Session 9: Revisiting the self.

- Decide on where we want to meet for our celebration. We will schedule
  interviews for next time. (Five minutes)

- Journal: "Who are you? Give some descriptors that qualify who you are."

- Teachers will also journal about their personal artifact. What objects did you
  bring? What do they signify about you? What do they signify about your
  perceptions of yourself as a teacher? What do they signify about your

perceptions of yourself as a writer? Did the objects change from the first

session? What might this signify about you? (Write for 15-20 minutes)

- Share your journal responses with one another, discuss (10 minutes)

- Share our manuscripts. Praise, question and polish our work. (50 minutes)

Session 10: Celebrations and successes.

- Eat and share NCTE sample proposals. Discuss meeting to prepare a

  proposal for next semester. (Two hours)

- Schedule interviews (Five minutes)

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Mary Powell lives in Phoenix, Arizona. She has taught high school English for 11 years in the Phoenix Union High School District. Mary has been married for 14 years to her high school sweetheart, Jerame, and has three dogs and three cats. Her passions include teaching, reading, and writing, eating great Mexican food, and hiking in the wilderness.